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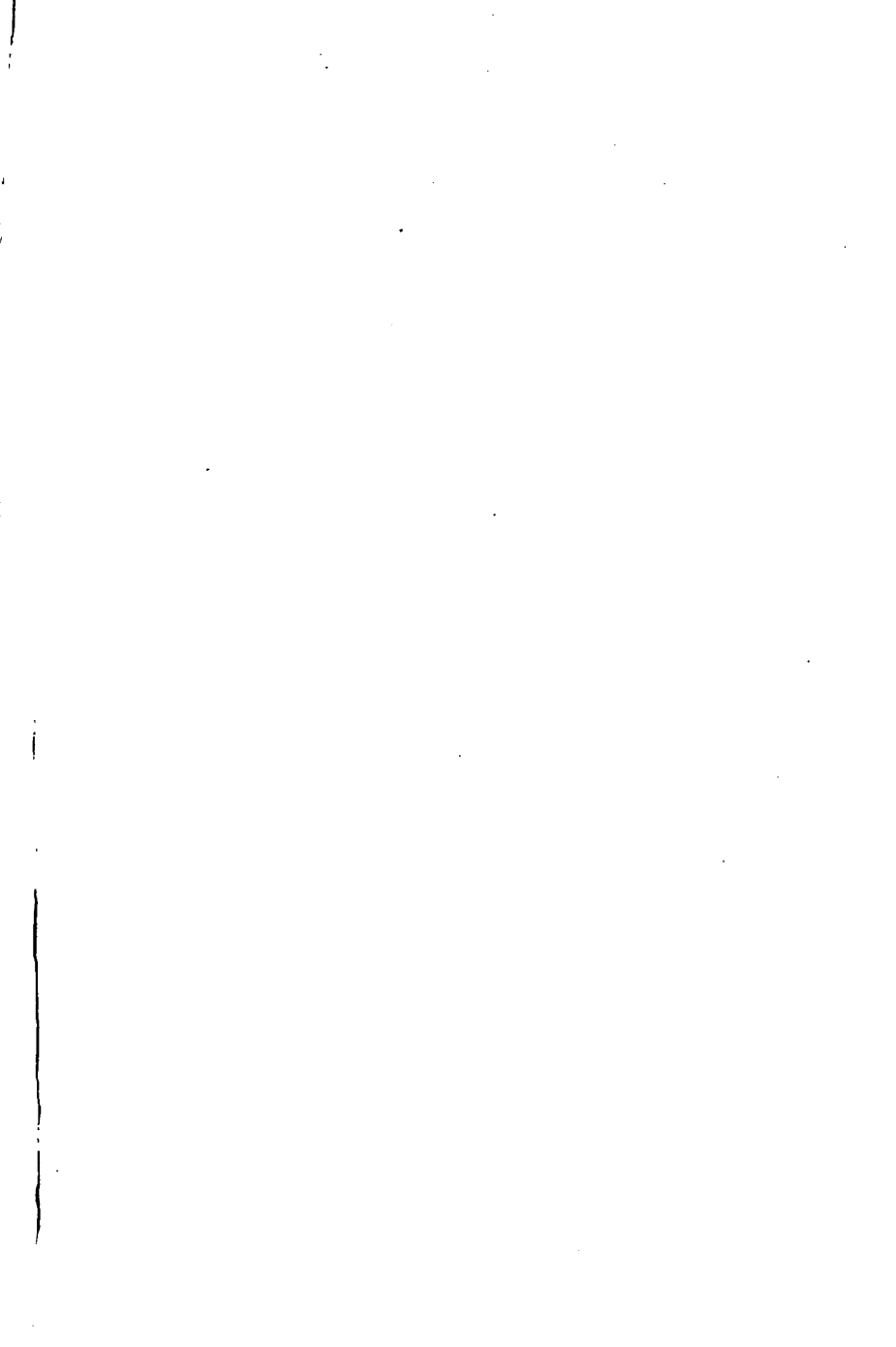
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THE HEAD STATION

THE HEAD STATION

A Novel of Australian Life

BY

MRS. CAMPBELL-PRAED,

AUTHOR OF "POLICY AND PASSION," "NADINE," "AFFINITIES," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

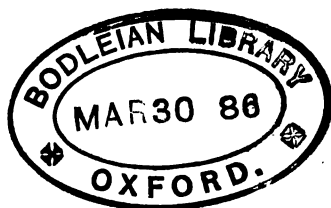
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THE HEAD STATION.

CHAPTER I.

IMPORTED FROM ENGLAND.

To turn from Doondi veranda towards the sombre expanse of bush and the majestic line of mountains blocking up the horizon, was like gazing out upon a waste of waters from the deck of a lighted and crowded ship.

Doondi was never silent; at evening it was even less so than during the day, for the men were all in from the run, and the balmy night-air seemed a fit atmosphere in which to be conversational and frolicsome.

Every door, front and rear, was thrown wide open. At that time of year it was happiness to live in a thorough draught. The lamplight streamed out in broad lines upon the veranda-boards and away into the dim garden, widening as it travelled, its rays meeting and crossing in the little courtyard, round three sides of which the wooden buildings extended. Of the wings facing each other, one was given up to members of the family, including the Clephanes and their relative, the other contained the kitchen, store, and bachelor guest-chambers, while in the main cottage were the sitting-rooms, two or three bedrooms, and Mr. Reay's office, which last, having windows looking on to the courtyard, was inconveniently placed for the transaction of private business.

The store-door stood open and Sib was giving out rations to a late passer-by.

In the kitchen the dresser shone, the tin covers caught reflections from the great open fire-place, and the women-servants bustled to and fro, every now and then throwing a word to the men who were smoking and yarning at their ease on the back veranda. Maafu and Combo were chattering by the water-cask; a pair of young lubras exhibiting a fresh-water cod, put forth a claim for "toombacco"; and down from the stockyard floated the not unmelodious lowing of a mob of beasts which had been brought in that afternoon. Captain Clephane in evening attire of spotless white duck was expending his superfluous energy in the cracking of a new stock-whip; and every time the thong fell and the sharp *st'wt* rang through the air

Barty gave an admiring shout and Jinks executed a leap from the veranda-rail, to which in the interval she again laboriously climbed.

From window to window, right through the pretty cedar-lined parlour all lay visible; and Gretta's laughter in the front veranda mingled with voices in Mrs. Reay's study, one of which set Hester Murgatroyd's heart beating as she stood arranging some flowers in the parlour.

A brief colloquy was going on between Mr. Reay and the tutor.

"Well, Durnford, how are you? For once in a way are you coming down to-night? You've been keeping a good deal to yourself lately. Better let Mrs. Baynes know up at the Quarters that there'll be no dinner wanted this evening, and join us down here. Afterwards we'll

just talk over that little business you mentioned."

"Thank you, Mr. Reay. Yes, I will come, with pleasure. But I'll say at once that it was premature of me to speak about the affair of the *Review*. On consideration, I have made up my mind to decline the offer."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it. The thing is not so grand that you should split scruples, and I have my doubts about a matter that old Blaize is concerned with. But you'll trust your own judgment, and consult your interests, Mr. Durnford, without reference to my opinion."

"I think that I can best serve my interests by remaining at Doondi, since you are good enough to wish it. I hope you won't think I'm unsettled. I was hasty in mentioning the proposition before I had weighed its disadvantages. I won't

keep you, sir; it's past dinner-time, and I'll send Maafu up to Mrs. Baynes."

"What has come to the man?" said Mr. Reay a minute later, as he passed into the sitting-room where Hester was adjusting a spray of lavender *statice* against a background of maidenhair fern on the chimney-piece. "You never saw such a long face as he pulled the day I started for Gundalunda. He seems quite perky again now. Then, he was all for being off, and to-day he is all for stopping. Well, I've been given to understand that poets are usually a shingle short. I hope it doesn't mean any nonsense about Gretta. Do you think it is anything of that sort, Hester?"

Hester's cheeks flushed. She was, by instinct, a truthful woman; and when she looked back upon her past career, was inclined to judge herself severely for the

one course of disingenuousness that had resulted in her unfortunate marriage. It had been, in fact, the outcome of a romantic disposition, and even at the time, her pride had rebelled against it. Since then, her ways had been open, and she realised now with a shock that she had henceforth something in her daily life to conceal ; something, which, if known, would be a shame to her and regarded with horror by the unsophisticated household of which she formed a part. It was natural that Gretta should have lovers, but that she, a married woman of thirty-two——Poor Hester's imagination refused to fill up the blank. She dared not meet her father's eyes. And yet a thrill of excitement ran through her at the mere suggestion of what the position involved, in spite of the shame of it—the secret joys, the stolen eye-caresses, the world of

understanding which should be theirs and theirs alone. And why should it be shameful? Why should it be wrong? Why should all the sweetness of life be given over to the young, the free? Why should there be none for those who had suffered, and whose mistakes had forged fetters which must be worn in uncomplaining dignity, but which need not debar them from the right to solace? Hester, lost in bewildering speculations, turned with a start as her father repeated his question in sharper tones—

“Is Durnford in love with Gretta, Hester?”

“Gretta!” faltered Hester. “No, father, I—I am sure that he is not.”

Mr. Reay gave a grunt of satisfaction, ignoring all other possibilities of the kind.

“Then there’s one fool less than I fancied for a moment,” he said. “We

have too many love-sick bipeds already about Doondi. I couldn't stand another—established on the premises, too! Mollie, Jinks, Clephane! Come along! Here's dinner," he called, as a bell sounded through the house, creating a little stir in the veranda. "Miss Gauntlett," he added, making a stride through the French window, and presenting his arm to Isabel, "you'll allow me the honour?"

Gretta and Mr. Wyatt were standing outside on the gravel-walk, a little apart from the others. She had a pair of scissors in her hand, and was cutting some of the early ripened bunches of grapes from the vine which tapestried the veranda. He held the leaf-trimmed basket, his handsome face turned towards her, his easy well-built figure picturesquely outlined against an abutting orange-tree. They had been interchanging

preliminary commonplaces paving the way to future intimacy. Gretta had a bright pretty fashion of saying nothings, so that they seemed to open up indefinite vistas.

There had been a pause. Gretta was reaching up towards a particularly fine cluster pendent from the eaves, and which an impatient tug at the vine had set swaying. It was barely within reach of her scissors.

"Allow me," said Wyatt, politely.

She had, however, triumphantly snipped the stem.

"There!" she cried, "I have it." But as she spoke the bunch dropped upon the log-steps, and was bruised to pieces. Gretta laughed, though in a discomfited manner.

"They were too high for you," said Wyatt, seriously. "You should set your

heart only upon things which are easily attainable."

"Is that your philosophy?" said Gretta.

"It's a very good system," he replied.

"The fruit of intuition or experience?" asked Gretta, demurely.

He hesitated an instant. There was a mischievous flash in her eye. Then with a serio-comic air:—

"Your thrusts strike home," he said. "If I say experience, at any rate you'll respect my system."

"Not I," she exclaimed. "I'm like Jinks, I never take anything for granted. It would upset all my own theories. I have no idea of being contented with what falls at my feet."

"You have ambitions?"

"A million. I couldn't endure an horizon bounded by gum-trees. All the

best things are out of reach. , I want the best."

"You won't get them. They'll drop out of your grasp like that bunch of grapes."

"Then I'll make a virtue of necessity and be satisfied with the second best," said Gretta, taking the basket from him ;
"that's practical philosophy."

"Do you believe in philosophy ?"

"No ; it's like an umbrella which won't open when a shower of rain comes on. Do you like grapes ?" she counter-queried.

"When they are easily gathered."

"That is a dreadfully lazy and immoral sentiment—especially for a squatter on the Eura, where each person is more energetic than his neighbour. I will give you a task. By way of wholesome training in the way you should go, I shall insist upon your coming out after dinner and

gathering not only your own dessert but mine too."

"I agree; you shall train me. I understand that I am on probation. Set me some more difficult task."

"One at a time. You won't find grape-picking so easy. Hardly any of the bunches are really ripe, and I'm extremely particular. I like the best, remember."

She passed with her basket into the drawing-room, where the rest of the party were already seated. It was an anomalous sort of meal. There was tea at one end of the table, over which Hester presided, and a piece of corned beef at the other. Mollie Clephane was carving a pair of chickens. Her husband mildly applauded. "At home, Mollie always feeds the lambs," he said. "I revel in cooking a damper, broiling a steak on two sticks, or even dispensing salt-junk with a clasp-

knife, but to carve chickens at a family repast suggests the country paterfamilias surrounded by his olive-branches, and calls up horrible visions of English middle-class domesticity."

Mr. Wyatt laughed, and Clephane went on.

"There's a want of dramatic fitness about your way of living, Mr. Reay. That's the one thing I have to find fault with in you Australians. You will not be original. You insist upon a Brummagem imitation of British observances. I always had a strong fellow-feeling with Mr. Micawber when he renounced wine-glasses and drank his punch out of a pint pot."

"Uncle Jack," said Isabel, "in the name of English civilisation I protest against pint-pots."

"Don't you believe in him," sardonically

cally remarked Mr. Reay, "he's a fraud. A fine fellow to talk is Clephane. I don't say that he can't work when he is after scrubbers or wild pigs, or some other scare-brain chase, but now hear! He first spends a fortune in carting Bass's ale the length of Tieryboo, and in the face of that he maintains that he has renounced English luxuries. That is na' reasonable, at least I don't think so. A man that won't drink tea or honest rum-and-water has no right to call himself a bushman."

There was a general laugh at the expense of Clephane, who calmly went to the side-board and, in the absence of a corkscrew, knocked the head off a bottle of beer with his knife, then proceeded to pour out and hand round the contents, filling a pannikin for himself, which he flourished with a theatrical air that might have done credit even to Mr. Micawber.

"The pint-pot is an international compromise," said Durnford, making an effort at gaiety.

"Not at all," replied Clephane in a melancholy tone; "it is a tribute to the memory of old England's pewter-measures and the pretty barmaids who handed them. Why don't they start draught-beer and barmaids on the Wyeroo line instead of Beamish & Co., with their cans of unmentionable anti-mosquito smoke. To be sure, Beamish and his can are thoroughly colonial."

"They should harmonize with your theory of dramatic fitness," put in Durnford.

"True," said Clephane, "they impressed my niece. She is very much struck with the realism of Australia."

"At all events," said Mr. Wyatt, looking towards Durnford, "Australian

realism has here a fine corrective," and his glance seemed to comprehend Hester, and the two blooming girls opposite him.

"Which means?" asked Gretta, with a smile half-shy half-provocative.

"A temple to the Ideal," replied he, promptly.

"Very pretty," murmured Gretta; and she could not refrain from a glance at Durnford and Hester which brought the red glow into the latter's cheeks.

Durnford exclaimed,

"Oh, I am no idealist—that sort of thing is out of date."

And Gretta went on,

"Mr. Wyatt's speech was worthy of Mr. Gustavus Blaize;" then she inquired whether Miss Gauntlett had made that gentleman's acquaintance.

Some light banter followed, and a volley of questions from the boys as to

Isabel's impressions of Leichardt's Land generally.

"You must make a public announcement," said Gretta, "like a certain royal personage who has been touring in the Antipodes, and who made a point of saying, the moment any one was presented to him, 'I am much surprised at the size of Australia; I think Sydney harbour the finest in the world; and I have not eaten a damper: and now we will have some conversation.'"

"Talking of personages," said Mr. Reay, passing his cup down for some more tea, "I am curious to see what sort of a chap they are sending us for a Governor. A nonentity, I make no doubt. A crown colony is a bad school. . . . Didn't some one say you were acquainted with him, Wyatt?"

"I was his private secretary for six months," replied Bertram, collectedly.

An uneasy consciousness disturbed Mr. Reay.

"Bless me! I remember hearing. But gossip goes in at one ear with me and out at the other. A pack of havers! You were private secretary? An upper-footman kind of business, isn't it? Six months? I suppose you couldn't stand the place?"

"It didn't stand me," said Bertram, grimly. "The whole thing was a fluke," he hastened to explain, but his manner seemed a little forced. "I came out from England in the same steamer with His Excellency, who was kind enough to take a fancy to me. His secretary got fever or something else on the voyage, and had to be sent home, and I was offered the billet, *pro tem*. You'll find General

Baldock very amenable to his Ministers, Mr. Reay ; and if you are fond of balls, Miss Reay, I can prophesy that there will be a good many at Government House, for Miss Baldock, who is at the head of affairs, is very fond of gaiety."

The boys were burning to ask some questions about Miss Baldock, and Joe tactlessly began, "I say—" when Gretta interposed.

"We don't know much about Government House or fashionable gaieties—at least Sib and I don't. We are the victims of an ungrateful country, which refuses to have our father for its Prime Minister ; and, as it would be beneath our dignity to stoop lower, we don't remove to Leichardt's Town during the Session, and Father only rushes down when a Railway Bill comes on. We are the ill-used ones of the family, Mr. Wyatt. Mollie had

her turn, and is tolerably civilized, but I have had no social advantages except three months in Sydney and the honour of dancing with a wandering earl, and of interchanging a few compliments with the celebrated personage before mentioned. As for Sib, he came out at the Wyeroo race ball, and went in again. His ideas of society are so elevated that no sphere, except an English one, will content him."

Isabel Gauntlett turned towards Sebastian, who was sitting next her. Many times during the meal his eyes had furtively sought her face with an expression of reverential admiration, but as yet his conversational efforts had been confined to such questions as: Would she take some more tea? Did she like scones or bread best? Was she tired after her long ride? &c. Sib rarely ventured upon more than a sentence at a time.

“Have you never been in England?” asked Isabel.

As she looked at him, Sib thought that he had never seen any one so beautiful and at once so gracious and so dignified. He did not, as is usual with many uncultivated youths, depreciate the charms of his own sisters, and was keenly sensible of Gretta’s prettiness and vivacity, of Mollie’s maternally comeliness, and of Hester’s spirituality. He shuddered at the thought of their association with anything unrefined, and drew a broad line between them and the daughters of squatters and Free Selectors on the Eura.

But even from his sisters Isabel stood apart in Sib’s estimation as a Madonna from an ordinary woman. She had, he thought, a thousand little high-bred graces which they did not possess. Her smile, the lily-like droop of her head, the manner

in which her hair was dressed, the sweep of her shoulders, the small daintinesses in her attire, the delicacy of her hands, the fineness of her cambric handkerchief, the stamp of fashion upon her ornaments,—all these trifles were noted by Sib and filled him with a sort of awe, which was at the same time a luxury.

He was so lost in contemplation of her that she softly repeated her question. There was a buzz of talk all round the table. Durnford and Hester conversed in low tones; Gretta and Wyatt were in animated conversation; Clephane, Mr. Reay, and Mollie held Nash's cattle under discussion. Sib wondered whether Gretta would ever tell Miss Gauntlett that, for a long time, her photograph had hung under the pedigree of Billy the bull, and determined to remove it upon his return to the Selection.

"No, I've never been in England," he said, with his nervous bush-laugh. "I'm Australian born—what you'd call a corn-stalk."

"I shouldn't call you a 'corn-stalk.' I didn't think corn grew here. Isn't it too hot?"

"Oh! Indian-corn, maize. Leichardt's Land natives, the white ones, are nicknamed 'cornstalks' because they are so long and thin. The Sydney ones are 'green melons,' and the Tasmanians 'gum-suckers.'"

Isabel gave a little laugh.

"Why?" began Sib, and stopped, turning very red.

"You are all so funny. It will take me a long time to learn your expressions and ways of thinking. Don't be angry. I like them."

"Let me teach you," exclaimed Sib;

and added dejectedly: "But it would not be worth learning, and you are better as you are."

A barking of dogs sounded outside, and through the open doors there floated a double *Coo-ee* and the tramp of horses' hoofs.

CHAPTER II.

A ROMANCE OF BOHEMIA.

"WHO is our late visitor?" said Mr. Reay.

"It's Mr. Ferguson!" cried Jinks, starting up in excitement from her chair, "That's his *Coo-ee*. He taught me how to make it." She pursed up her small lips, and gave forth in answer two long-drawn notes, followed by a short staccato call,—

Cōo-ēē, coō-eě.

There was a little commotion in the dining-room. Sib went into the yard to welcome the newcomer. Hester sent out

for fresh tea, and Jinks, who had been ordered off to bed, put on an expression of the utmost sweetness and solemnity.

“If you please, dear Gran’pa (I’m not talking to you; I’m talking to my gran’pa), please, dear Gran’pa, may I not stay and hear if Pat is coming? you love good little girls, little girls who sit like this;” and she placed herself bolt upright, and began to twiddle her thumbs in a slow demure manner.

Gretta moved away, and stood silently in the shadow of the veranda.

Presently Sib re-entered, with him Ferguson, in riding-costume, looking very stalwart, and a little embarrassed, but with something in his face which seemed to say that he had come for a purpose.

“How about the muster, Jim?” asked Clephane. “I thought you weren’t coming till next week.”

"Why," answered James, "we have been drafting close here—up at the One-Eyed Waterhole. We got finished sooner than I expected. I didn't think of it this morning. The rest are camping at the boundary-fence; and as we brought in a strawberry cow, that I'm sure belongs to your milking-herd, Mr. Reay, I thought I'd drive her over, and ask you to give me a bed. I must start off before breakfast to-morrow."

"All right," said Mr. Reay, "I'm much obliged. You've saved Combo a day, by bringing in that strawberry cow. Go along to one of the spare rooms and wash your hands. If you had been half-an-hour sooner you'd have sat down with us. As it is, we'll keep you company from the veranda. It's much too hot for sitting indoors. Bring out the grapes, Jinks, and my tobacco-pouch."

The night was still and clear. It had all the magnetism of a dry tropical eve, in which every waft of air seems charged with subtle electricity; when soul and body are sensitive to the most delicate impressions; and a look, a tone, a perfume, becomes an agent in that mystic world of half experiences which is the birthplace of emotions. The air was full of strange murmurings of ephemeral life, of soft rustlings, and of rich exotic odours mingling with the more ethereal fragrance of aromatic gum and scrub-muntein blooming in the rockery. Now and then, there was the dull flop of a frog as it fell from the veranda eaves, or the whirr of some uncanny insect circling towards the lighted doorways. The moon, not yet at the full, sent filmy beams athwart the pathway; and the white pillars of *rinka sporum*, and the tall stakes, entwined by

grotesque-limbed cacti, looked like radiant ghosts and uncouth goblins. Set low in heaven, the Southern Cross appeared to touch the summit of Comongin ; and high overhead shone Aldebaran, Orion, and the Scorpion's gemmed tail. Harmless summer lightning played round the peaks of Tieryboo, and the naked side of Knapp's Cliff gleamed like silver in the white light.

In front of the veranda a broad gravel-walk stretched from fence to fence, shaded at each end by orange and lemon-trees. In the centre lay a heart-shaped flower-bed ; and beyond, the trellised vinery sloped gently down to a chain of tiny waterholes, fringed with swamp-oaks and sedgy grass. Hither, on pretence of finding their dessert, Gretta and Wyatt wandered. At first the fruit quest was sufficiently earnest, one bunch after

another rejected, till fastidious Gretta announced that she was content; and, standing on the lagoon's marge, toyed prettily with the grapes, which she lifted one by one to her lips.

Gretta's moods were fitful. She had talked with so much animation to Wyatt at the close of dinner that their intimacy had made rapid strides; but now she seemed to have lost her vivacity. They were only a few yards from the house, though by reason of the intervening trellis, and the slope of the hill, the distance appeared greater, and they were completely hidden from view. Mr. Wyatt drew from his pocket a cigarette-case, mounted in old silver, which had a stamp of costliness and refinement, and asked permission to smoke. Gretta nodded silently. She noticed the case; cigarettes also were not in vogue on the

Eura, and she liked the perfume of Wyatt's weed. Kneeling down, she stooped over the lagoon and dipped her fingers. He seated himself upon the stump of a felled tree, the trunk of which dropped into the water. As he slowly emitted thin wreaths of smoke he watched admiringly the graceful gestures with which she shook the water from her hands, and dried them upon her pocket-handkerchief. Frankly unconventional as was Gretta's manner, it had no lack of dignity. He got up, and waited standing till she had seated herself lower down upon the tree-trunk. The little act of courtesy pleased Gretta. A lightning thought, of which the next moment she was ashamed, flashed through her mind. "A Eura bushman wouldn't have done that."

The voices in the veranda were

audible—that of Ferguson sonorous and not unmusical, nor definitely colonial; although the accentuation of certain syllables, and the diminuendo closing a sentence, gave evidence as to nationality—then Mr. Reay's dry tones rising distinctly.

“And ye know that fellow Bowles? And he jest takes the calves from the mother, and keeps them six months, and then claps his brand on them. And now I ca' that na mair than cattle-stealing; and it's not a right thing—at least I don't think so.”

Then Ferguson, with a sad and somewhat impatient accent, which moved Gretta to compunction,

“Oh, you are right, Mr. Reay 'There's no doubt one has to keep a sharp look-out on Free Selectors, especially anywhere close to Wyeroo.”

"This is very pleasant," exclaimed Wyatt, removing his cigar and breathing a sigh, half melancholy, half complacent; "we have chosen the better part. It's more than pleasant," he went on, "it's *almost* happiness. Do you know, Miss Reay, I have a theory that true happiness is quite incompatible with emotion. To be happy one ought to have arrived at a state of absolute passivity."

Gretta roused herself.

"The 'almost' is a concession to my vanity, I suppose. It would be distressing to think that I had reduced you, so soon, to a state of absolute passivity."

He drew in and expelled another whiff.

"For my own part," continued Gretta, "I like sensation. I want to see and feel everything. I want to lead the life of English people. I want to know what

the world is, and what it can give me. I'd rather be miserable than dull."

"Oh! I too object strongly to dulness. There we are at one. And I had better own that if I rail against emotion it is because I feel keenly enough to know what reaction means."

Gretta eyed him with candid interest.

"You haven't got to that yet?" he said.

"I have got to nothing," she replied, frankly. "I am very ignorant of life."

"Yet you propose to teach me?"

"Only bush ways," she returned. "I don't think you have any right to call yourself a squatter." She laughed softly. "I wonder what you'd do if you were bushed. I am sure you wouldn't know how to follow down a watershed or guide yourself by the lie of the ridges."

“There’s certainly a monotony in ridges.”

“Not to Sib. He’d know one gum-tree from another along a track, and see a difference in every gully. I can’t imagine you overlanding cattle! And then there are quantities of small things.—I don’t suppose it would ever occur to you to blow up a fire with your hat. Jack Clephane says that’s an infallible sign of an Australian squatter. I daresay you don’t know how to make a damper.”

“That I can,” cried Wyatt, triumphantly, “and eat it too—a far greater achievement. But I confess that I couldn’t pass an examination. I bought a station without serving my apprenticeship as a new-chum, and I am lucky in having such a thorough-going partner as James Ferguson. He’s a first-rate fellow, isn’t he?”

"Yes," assented Gretta with a slight hesitation.

"Full of pluck and perseverance. I couldn't choose a better model, could I?"

"No!" said Gretta with decision.

"But two of us on the same pattern might be a little tedious. My conscience pricks me at the present moment. Instead of feeling *almost* happy here, I ought to be one of the veranda group improving my mind on the subject of Free Selectors. Oh please! Don't force me to leave this delicious spot," as she made a movement, "I am not going to begin work till after New Year's day. Jim has given me a reprieve till then."

"I wonder that you came out to Australia," said Gretta, suddenly. "You don't like work; every one works here. You'll be very dull. And you must have

led a pleasant life in England. At least, Mr. Blaize described you as ——”

“ Whirling in the vortex of London society. Yes, I know Gustavus’s style. Won’t you give me credit for having, like your brother-in-law, discovered the hollowness of civilization and the barrenness of Upper Bohemia ? ”

“ Upper Bohemia ! ” she repeated, vaguely.

“ That’s a country with which you are not acquainted, Miss Reay. I know it well, and it represents London to me. I lived in it from the time I left Oxford till I came out to Australia two years ago. It’s a region of vanity and humbug, cheap puffs, tall talk and artistic and literary shop, with mediocrity taking the airs of genius, and advertising itself upon every blank wall and in the sheets of every newspaper. ‘ Advertise thyself ! ’ is the

motto in the Old World nowadays. Life is nothing but Pears's Soap. I wanted to get away from Pears's Soap. Don't tell me that Adelina Patti and Mrs. Langtry will gaze at me from the outside cover of the *Eura Chronicle*. I thought that I'd left them behind with the donkey-boys at Port Said. You look mystified, Miss Reay. Is it possible that you haven't heard of Pears's Soap?"

"Of course I have, and I know all about Mrs. Langtry and the rest of them. But I don't see what they have to do with it all."

"No," he answered, "but you would if you had lived in Bohemia. I am glad that you have not."

"Why? It seems to me that is just the sort of experience I am sighing for."

"They'd have turned you into a professional beauty, and I should perhaps

have humbly sued for permission to paint your portrait in the hope of advertising myself."

"Did you paint portraits? "

"I have done a good many things. I once exhibited a picture in the Grosvenor Gallery. I wrote a play which was accepted and acted; and I published a novel that was flayed by the critics, and pronounced too improper for the circulating libraries."

"You wrote a play that was acted!" repeated Gretta.

"Is that so wonderful? It was a success into the bargain."

"Not wonderful that you should have written it, but to be successful! to be great! What did you want more?"

"More!" repeated Wyatt. "Success as a dramatist doesn't necessarily give one love—happiness. These are what

a man wants out of life. The whole thing sickened me. Oh, the wire-pulling, the puppet-dancing, the petty rivalry and jealousy, the paint, powder, dirt, and unreality. My dear Miss Reay, if you knew as much about actors and actresses as I do you wouldn't be astonished that I gave up catering for them. They are the death of Art."

"Oh, why?" exclaimed Gretta.

"They all want the middle of the stage, and worry the piece like a pack of hungry hounds. No one would write plays who hadn't got to earn his living. There's no satisfying the egregious vanity of a star. You must write him a part, and he must have Hamlet, Othello, Richard the Second, and Falstaff, all rolled in one. If Shakespeare were to come down from heaven, and offer Othello to a manager-star, he wouldn't take it, because Iago is too good."

“Notwithstanding your sneers, Miss Reay,” he began, “you are forced to own me as a compatriot. I was born in New South Wales, and spent the first ten years of my life upon a Riverina station. I dare say you know that my father lost his life in the wreck of the *Boomerang*. That is an historical wreck. You’ve heard how she struck within sight of the lights of home, and all on board went down,”—his deep voice trembled a little. “It’s very pathetic. My father had gone out to settle up his affairs. My mother had remained with me at home. She never returned here, and that is how I came to be educated in England. Some years later she married Grandoni the musician, and her house is one of the great musical and artistic centres in London. Well, to be brief, I left Oxford, and took up painting as a quasi-profession, studied in Paris

and Rome, and might, perhaps, have done something had I had the incentive of poverty. I fell in love—disastrously. It is not necessary to go into detail. She was an actress. That was my play-writing period. She wanted to be advertised. I wrote the part for her, and it was a lucky hit. She mounted to a higher rung of the ladder leaving me behind. I wasn't rich enough or sufficiently ambitious to please her—perhaps I wasn't sufficiently in earnest. At any rate that episode turned my views into a practical channel. I had got a sickening of dilettanteism. As I don't come in for the best part of my fortune till after my mother's death it seemed prudent to try and turn to account what money I had available. I couldn't stand harness, and investing in Australia seemed under the circumstances the most natural thing to do, though it was an odd

jump from Bohemia to the bush. I came out as I mentioned with Governor Baldock, and accepted the temporary appointment as private secretary to His Excellency. I'm rather a cormorant in my craving for experience, and I had a curiosity to see something of Viceregal life. It was amusing. I could make you laugh over some of the curious things which fall in the way of a colonial Governor's private secretary."

Gretta laughed now, but with a little pique. She thought that Wyatt despised the Australians.

"Unfortunately for me the Governor had a daughter," he went on. "You will see Miss Baldock in Leichardt's Town, so I'll make no attempt at describing her. I committed the indiscretion of admiring her. We became engaged. Of course her father disapproved. Grandoni was all

very well as a performer at St. James's Hall or at private concerts, but a closer connectionship he felt would be objectionable. There was a six months' battle ending in my defeat. Miss Baldock broke off the engagement during my absence in this colony."

Gretta uttered a sympathetic ejaculation, "Oh why?"

Wyatt laughed with a good deal of bitterness in his voice, "Why? I cannot tell you. We were apart you know; and I was on probation as it were. There was some correspondence of a restricted kind. You know how women write under those circumstances—neither hot nor cold, and afraid of committing themselves. Her letters wounded me. It was evident that her trust in me had no root, and that she feared the future. If I could have gone to her—— It is so much easier to speak than

to write convincingly. Letters are the devil's invention for separating lovers. At any rate she wrote at last in a curt fashion, and broke it all off. And I was too proud to ask questions. I set sail for England as soon as I could. And now I've quite got over it, and am satisfied that it was neither her fault nor mine, but a wise dispensation of Providence."

"If," said Gretta, thoughtfully, "you found out now that she had loved you all the time, and that there had been a misunderstanding?"

He was silent for a moment or two. "It is possible," he said, slowly, "but not at all probable. I should not care to make that discovery. It would be like raking old ashes to see if an ember remained. Men's loves burn fiercely while they last, but they don't live without feeding. I have no doubt that by this time Miss

Bladock has chosen more wisely. I have been singularly unfortunate, have I not? and I had quite intended to make a new beginning. I had bought Gundalunda a little while before, as you know, in partnership with James Ferguson. My plan was to work there for a time, then to leave the management in his hands, and, after my marriage, to live in Sydney or Melbourne. I don't think you were up here when I came to take delivery?"

"I don't know," replied Gretta, simply. "No; I think that was my memorable season in Sydney." She added, after a pause—

"You will meet her again?"

"Not likely; though it wouldn't make any difference one way or the other. My wounds have been cauterised. They don't smart; only the scars remain, as

yet absolutely conventional, well-bred and well-educated, but without a spark of originality."

"Miss Gauntlett awes me," said Gretta; "I am filled with wonder and admiration when I look at the draping of her skirt. There is no doubt that English-cut clothes produce a solemnising effect upon the Australian mind. And then her manners are as perfect as her dress. I am sure that however much our aboriginal customs might jar upon her, she would be too well-bred to show it, and that painful consciousness will add to her sufferings and intensify our humiliation. Don't you think we had better pack her up in cotton-wool and send her home again, labelled, 'Not calculated to stand rough usage'?"

"I don't think you need be alarmed," replied Wyatt. "The poor little girl has

probably been kept in leading-strings all her life, and is now enjoying the first thrill of freedom. She is like a caged bird set loose. If I may venture to prophesy, she will become so enamoured of liberty that she'll end by marrying a rough, bearded squatter on the Barcoo, in order to escape from the luxurious dulness of Heatherleigh Court."

CHAPTER III.

BITTER-SWEET.

FERGUSON was pacing the gravel stretch between the flower-bed and the veranda, and contributing an occasional remark to a discussion between Mr. Reay and Captain Clephane concerning the turf feats of a certain blood mare, which could only be settled by a reference to the *Eura Racing Calendar*. He halted as Gretta and Wyatt approached. The latter gave him a careless nod.

“You are quite right, old fellow. This

sort of thing is much better than camping-out. I should think, Miss Reay, that there must be a good many cattle-camps within convenient reach of Doondi. You must have had a long day, Ferguson. Why do you make a martyr of yourself to-morrow ? ”

“ It’s a difficult beat. They couldn’t get on without me.”

“ Oh, that is one of the delusions one shakes off with years. ‘ They ’ always get on very well without one at a pinch. But it is not for me to make cynical remarks. Your energy throws my laziness into unpleasant relief. However, as I know neither the country nor the cattle, I don’t suppose that I could be of any real assistance to-morrow.”

“ No,” replied Ferguson, “ we are not short of hands. And you’ll like stopping here.” Unconsciously he cast a wistful

glance at Gretta. "Nothing short of urgency on the part of butchers justifies one in collecting a mob at this time of year."

"Oh," said Gretta, in her soft mocking way, "butchers are the arbiters of Fate for us. Our livelihood, our happiness, depend upon butchers. One would gladly risk a sunstroke rather than send a butcher away unsatisfied."

The music had ceased a few minutes ago. Wyatt passed into the parlour, where Isabel stood uncertainly by the piano, while Mollie sat with her work-basket on her lap; and Sib, a book upon his knees, longed that Isabel would play again, but dared not ask her.

Wyatt did so instead. He was passionately fond of music, and, moreover, possessed a fine tenor voice. He had been wondering who would play his

accompaniments. Isabel's touch was extremely sympathetic. Gretta moved on a few steps with Ferguson. She stooped over the flower-bed and gathered a sprig of scented verbenas, which she crushed between her hands, and delicately raised to her nostrils. Her pulse quickened a little as she glanced up at her companion. The expression of his face prepared her for an ebullition of feeling. There was something dramatic in the situation which frightened while it excited her. Gretta was a flirt. The trees and vines in the Doondi garden might, could they but speak, have described some curious love-scenes, but there are limits to flirtation, and Gretta's relations with James Ferguson had passed beyond those limits. He had been a part of her life, a background to her dreams, never anything more than a background, but always

there between herself and the far-distant future. Now it was as though he had stepped out of perspective, and insistently obtruded himself upon her notice. There was something odd and incongruous in the position, quite at variance with her idea of kind, handsome, steadfast James, always tolerant of her humours, never swerving in his admiration, patiently waiting her pleasure, whose devotion had been a pleasant stimulant to existence, without causing any after reaction or disagreeable sense of humiliation.

A strange little tremor came over her. She made a movement as though she were about to re-enter the house. His pleading voice arrested her.

“Don’t go in, Gretta. It seems such a long time since I have seen you. I was

afraid you didn't mean to speak to me this evening."

"I have been making acquaintance with your partner. It was very nice of you to send him over. He has a fine flavour of European culture. I feel improved already. Doondi has been like a stagnant pool. It's time something happened. If it hadn't been for water-melons and the thought of our Christmas gaieties I must have succumbed. You are all coming over next week, Aunt Judith and the rest. I've all sorts of plans in my head; I'm going to give the blacks a treat. Do let us have a good time and begin the New Year cheerfully. Do you know, Mr. Ferguson, I have a presentiment that it is going to be a particularly eventful year?"

She spoke hurriedly, and ended with a pretty, embarrassed laugh, as though

there were some deeper meaning behind her light words. Ferguson's eyes met her's eagerly.

"When did you first feel your presentiment, Gretta? Last time that I was here I remember you boasted that of two weaknesses you were entirely free—and they were superstition and sentiment."

"So I am—in a general way; but this evening I could swallow a ghost or shed tears over poetry. It's the electricity in the atmosphere."

At that moment Hester and Mr. Durnford emerged from the shadow of the orange-trees, where they had been sitting. They were not talking. There was a feeling of restraint upon them, and their *tête-à-tête* had not been entirely rapturous. As yet the world of love was new to them, and they were timid—he of uttering a word which might imply unknighly

advantage of her surrender, and she, fearful of this new joy, with which a vague sense of guilt and terror blended, fearfullest look or gesture might shadow the White Ideal which he sang.

They would have passed silently into the house—out of the dim crowd of formless desires and inarticulate thoughts which seemed to haunt the darkness, into the light, the music, the homely talk—but Gretta turning, and struck by something in their look which chimed with her mood, addressed the poet inconsequently.

“ Mr. Durnford, you write a great deal about our affinity with Nature, magnetic thrills, et cetera. Tell me isn't this a night for sympathies, weird influences, presentiments, and all the thing you poets make such a fuss about? I begin to believe in the unseen a little bit. There *are* times when unrealities seem the realities

of life. You don't happen to have a divining-glass handy? What's the most tragical thing that could happen to us? Pleuro-pneumonia among the cattle? Alas, Billy the bull has been a victim already. A horde of Free Selectors? A passionate attachment—stark, hopeless, and magnificent? 'We are all too commonplace, for anything so romantic, except perhaps, Hester, Mr. Gustavus Blaize, and you.' Gretta paused in confusion, suspecting that she had made an unfortunate remark. Durnford laughed awkwardly, and declared that it was cruel of her to make him profess mysticism as well as poetry. Surely he had endured chaff enough! and Gretta suddenly changed her tone.

"Hester, you look as white as a ghost, yourself. Is it the moonlight? And you

are shivering with the thermometer at 95° ! ”

“ I think that I am aguish,” faltered Hester. “ I will go in.”

“ Mrs. Murgatroyd has not yet got over the effect of her damp walk,” said Durnford.

“ By the way ! ” exclaimed Gretta, “ you never told us where you took shelter that day. Was it in the old shepherd’s hut ? ”

“ No, it was —— ” Hester began and halted, shrinking from the mention of that sanctified spot which she dreaded revealing to profane curiosity.

“ I have discovered several eyries in the rocks near Point Row,” interposed Durnford. “ I always like perching myself above the world when I want to read anything stiff. If you have any desire to turn hermit, Miss Gretta, I’ll

engage to place two or three caves at your service."

"That would be more in your line than mine," retorted Gretta; "I have no intention of renouncing worldly vanities. You are going?" as he held out his hand.

"I have some work to do in order to keep pace with the boys to-morrow—exercises to correct. This is unusual dissipation for me. Good-night, Mr. Ferguson."

"I hope you intend to be more sociable during the Christmas holidays," said Gretta. "Don't let Miss Gauntlett stop playing, Hester. I am going to stay out of doors a little longer, and meditate upon my presentiment. Life wasn't meant to be dragged out between four walls on such a stifling night as this."

She turned down the trellised path.

Ferguson followed her. Durnford and Hester were left alone.

“You are ill?” he questioned, anxiously.

“No ; I only feel strange—as if I were in a dream.”

“Tell me that you are happy. What would be the use of anything if I had made you sorrowful ?”

“Yes, I’m happy. But I know that it is a dream. There seems something false. It’s bitter-sweet.”

His eyes pierced her soul.

“Oh !” she cried, “what have I said ? I wound you.”

“Truth before all !” he exclaimed.

“*You* say that ?” she returned in a peculiar tone.

“I do say it—with the strength of all my convictions. We stand upon a mountain while we are true to each other. God is above us—the world

below. Bitter-sweet!" he went on vehemently. "Did I not know that? It was why, for your sake, I meant to leave you. Did I not know that soul and body would be in perpetual agonising strife? There's the falseness."

"Yes," she said, wearily; "that is it. There's always a struggle—the position is false."

"To me that is nothing," he exclaimed. "Love should transcend it; I've thought the matter out and faced the penalty—as a man can, a woman's different. You only *feel* it like a dumb animal or a child in darkness. If it's too hard for you we'll part."

"Part! No, oh no! I could not bear it. You are noble; you see the stars; I will try to remember: God above—the world below us."

"Then you decide? I will not leave

you!" he cried, passionately. "You will meet me at the cave to-morrow? I saw that my evasion jarred upon you. Consider; it is our refuge from the world—it should be sacred. Do you know that I spent yesterday afternoon in exploring, and I have found a much easier ascent. Dream sweetly, my Hester. Think of the hour of happiness which will be ours to-morrow. You have been silent, oppressed to-night. These shadows will vanish away. I have so much to hear—so much to tell you. You fill me with high, pure thoughts. You teach me to understand myself. You explain the fevered dreams which have made my life kaleidoscopic. Through you I reach eternity. Good-night—till to-morrow."

"Till to-morrow," she echoed; and he left her.

CHAPTER IV.

“FOR GLANCE OF THINE A WORLD.”

DOWN by the lagoon Gretta and Ferguson were sitting. Not at the spot where Bertram Wyatt had told his story a little while before. Gretta, moved by an impulse which she would have been at a loss to analyse, turned away from this natural halting-place; and the two strolled on to the very verge of the garden, where a palisade covered with prickly-pear divided it from the home-paddock.

The unshapely leaves and twisted limbs

of the cactus rose high—an effectual rampart against the cattle and horses congregated round the water-hole. Here the larger lagoon widened, and, unshadowed by sheoaks, it formed the foreground to an extensive tract of plain studded by gaunt dead gums, tiers of forest wolds, and beyond, the fortress-like summit of Comongin.

Gretta's eyes rested affectionately upon this familiar feature of the landscape.

“I wonder,” she said, suddenly, “whether I should miss old Comongin much if I were to go away from here for ever? Somehow, he seems to belong to me, and I should feel it a kind of treason to forget him. I think that I like him better than anything else upon the Eura.”

They were sitting upon a rustic bench,—a slab laid across two stumps. Over-

head, a ti-tree spread its gnarled branches and dipped its bottlebrush-blossoms into the glassy water. It was very still, except for the whirring of insects about them, the faint sound of voices and music from the house, and an occasional plash or stealthy gliding under the lily leaves, which told of the movement of some reptile—and Ferguson's warning against snakes, as they sat down, was not unnecessary.

"Why do you talk like that?" he asked with emphasis.

"I don't understand. How?"

"You seem full of ideas. Fate—presentiments—going away."

"It isn't reasonable to suppose that I'm going to spend my whole existence on the Eura. I don't know what puts going away into my head to-night. It's my mood."

"You aren't usually given to moods. I always find you the same."

"Oh, that sounds very monotonous. What am I like in my normal condition, James?"

"Clever, bright, capable, getting at the heart of everything, and being gay and agreeable in so unconscious a way that it would be impossible to imagine you taking life seriously ——"

"Oh, you don't know me in the least," she interrupted.

"I was going to say: if one hadn't an intuitive feeling that there was a great deal more under the surface."

"That's true; but you have only told me good things; now the bad points."

"I don't think that there is anything specially bad about you," he said, slowly; "and if there were I shouldn't be the one to find it out."

She waived the latter part of his remark.

"That's just it!" she cried. "I'm not specially good nor specially bad. I'm curious about the world. I want to have experiences. I want to be quite sure what is the first-best thing in life before I drop down to the second or third-best. Do you see, James?"

"Yes," he answered sadly, "I see."

"If I tell you a secret, you mustn't ever bring it up against me," continued Gretta. It is that I am very impressionable down to a certain depth. The outside of me is soft—the inside is granite. I'm very fond of excitement and the sense of power. If I can't get excitement out of big things, as I should like to do, I take it out of small ones, and despise myself for my pains."

"One wouldn't think you took pains," he said. "If that were so your power would be less. It's your unconsciousness.

You don't even seem to see that you are giving pain, and you often do, and, I think, know it. But that's a part of you, and I don't mind it—if you weren't a little heartless you wouldn't be Gretta Reay.”

Gretta moved slightly; she had been leaning forward, her chin upon her hands.

“This is very interesting; I like being analysed. But it's rather hard of you to insinuate that my unconsciousness is a sham. I do not hurt people wilfully. I'm not bad enough for that. If they put themselves in my way and expect from me what I have not to give, is it my fault that they are disappointed?”

He did not answer. She went on impetuously.

“You are all so narrow in your ideas. You speak and act as though the Eura district were the only place in the

universe, and Gretta Reay the most important person in it."

"I have no doubt," returned Ferguson, "that if the Eura squatters could realise that the world is wide, and contains millions of charming young women, they would bear their disappointment more philosophically. But it is hard to be philosophical under some circumstances, and I'm ready to admit that bushmen are not imaginative. They don't see further than their horizon."

Gretta altered her position, and drew further back against the ti-tree.

"I remember, long ago, when we first came here," she said, thoughtfully. "I was nine years old, but dreadfully ignorant, and much more fanciful than I am now. I used to fancy that the world lay just on the other side of the mountains—the world of story-books—and that if I

could only get round Comongin all sorts of things would happen to me; and I should think and feel quite differently—life would be altogether more vivid. I have that fancy still sometimes.”

“Gretta,” said Ferguson, stolidly, “it isn’t you, yourself — your goings and comings, the place of your abode, the sights you see—which will make that world a reality to you. It’s only love which can do that; and the man who succeeds in making you care for him will open the door for you.”

“I daresay you are right,” she answered, “but how did you arrive at that conclusion? I didn’t know that you thought of such things.”

“I only think of them when I think of you,” he answered simply.

“I hope that you don’t class me as one of those morbid-minded girls one

reads of—always hungering after emotion. I suppose there's a sort of fascination in the idea of being in love. I think so till I reason about it—then I hate it."

"Why should you hate it?" he asked, quietly.

"It would be bondage. I couldn't be a slave. And then the feverishness of it—hot and cold fits; burning and shivering; one's heart on fire; and, after all, a handful of cinders left . . . A tragedy! In books, that kind of thing always ends in tragedy. You can't fit a magnificent passion on to sober married life—such as people would live on the Eura."

"I think that tragedies and magnificent passions are possible even on the Eura."

"No, no, James, never! Tragic heroes don't wear moleskins and cabbage-tree hats. You couldn't imagine a hero patching his saddle and smoking store-

tobacco, or a heroine serving out rations to the hands or stirring pie-melon jam. By the way, do you like it flavoured with essence of lemon or ginger? You can have your choice.”

“Tell me your idea of a hero, Gretta?”

“He must be caviar to the general,” she replied, promptly; “a figure of speech which is applicable in more ways than one. We don’t often get such luxuries on the Eura—and how unpopular he would be in the district!” she laughed softly. “Of course, he must be a product of civilisation, handsome, world-worn, a little oppressed by the number and variety of his experiences. In fact, he ought to excite one’s curiosity besides rousing one’s admiration. He should have stretched-out feelers in all directions; and should have fine ideas about art, as well as all the manly graces, and most of the manly virtues.”

"Your description makes me think of Bertram Wyatt," said Ferguson; "I don't know why, unless it is that he is artistic, and certainly the product of civilisation."

Gretta flamed out,

"You are quite mistaken. Do you suppose that I meant to be understood literally? Your remark proves at least that bushmen have no imagination. My hero was up in the air—the sum total of the last set of novels you lent me."

Ferguson received her rebuke meekly.

"I beg your pardon. It was natural my thoughts should turn to Wyatt."

There was a note of suppressed anxiety in his voice. He seemed about to say more, but checked himself. The vague uneasiness to which he had been a prey ever since his arrival could hardly be termed jealousy. It had occurred to him long ago that Gretta's anti-colonial preju-

dices would predispose her towards his partner; but he believed, upon Wyatt's own assertion, that the latter's heart was entirely given to Miss Baldock, and that he lived in the hope of again meeting her and renewing their engagement, for the rupture of which he held her father responsible. Ferguson's opinion might have become modified had he been a listener to Wyatt's tentative confidences by the lagoon; but, even so, it would have been difficult for him to conceive that such affection as Wyatt had professed could waver so rapidly. Scorn of pettiness, and a sentiment of loyalty, barred his lips against detraction of a possible rival; but the triumphant thought, “He is weak and I am strong,” flashed through him and gave him courage.

Gretta noticed his preoccupied air, and partially divined what was passing

through his mind. She felt within herself an embarrassing consciousness that forced her into a curious sympathy with his mood. She stole a look at his averted face, and was struck by its frank fearlessness. He sighed, drawing himself up as if with new determination; and she was moved by an impulse almost of tenderness.

“Don’t let us talk any more in this stupid fashion. And you look so serious. Have you ridden far? Are you tired?”

“Yes,” he answered to her last question, “not with my day’s riding, but with the burden of hope deferred.”

“Ah! now, James, you are talking like a hero.”

“Gretta,” said the young man, passionately, “don’t mock at me. I am in deadly earnest. What are we all living and longing for but happiness. And happiness is love! You think that there

can be no romance on a cattle-station. You are looking for it beyond Comongin. And it is here—at your side. I understand you, Gretta. I love you, and I mean to try and make you love me.”

“You said something like this once before, James, and I begged you not.”

“You bade me wait, and I have waited. I’ll wait longer—years if you choose. But something has been tearing at me all day. I felt that I must see you and tell you all that was in my heart. I too have had a presentiment.”

“Tell me about it, James.”

“It came with a dream I had last night. I often dream of you, Gretta. I feel your hand in mine. I see you smiling at me. You are always sweet and kind in my dreams. It is hard to believe when I awake that you don’t care for me. I will not believe it.”

"Tell me your dream," she questioned softly.

"I thought we were standing on the deck of a ship. I held you close to me. I knew that we were very happy, and that somehow you belonged to me. The sea was so blue; there were tiny wavelets flecked with foam; and the air was fresh, and a little cold, just as it is here in the early spring mornings. On one side of us there was a long line of lovely coast; blue hills, some in shadow, some bare and glistening; a grey road, winding beneath rocky precipices, with curious round pines here and there; or the ruins of some old castle perched upon an overhanging cliff. Oh! it was like nothing we have ever seen. Down by the shore there were villages and gardens, quaint bridges, and rivers winding down from the hills. And then, far off, there rose snow-clad

peaks like thrones in heaven; and the light of the rising sun upon them seemed God's glory resting there. It was Italy, Gretta—I seemed instinctively to know that, and the sun was rising for us over a new world.”

Gretta leaned forward again; her eyes bright, her parted lips trembling. His vivid word-painting had carried her away.

“Italy!” she repeated, “and you saw all this? It must have been beautiful, James.”

“It was beautiful, because *you* were beside me,” Ferguson went on, kindling with the eloquence of love; “a new world for you and for me—but old—old as history, and full of the romance you long for. Gretta, will you come? Will you marry me? and see with me all that we've read and dreamed of—then come

back to old Comongin and the Eura? Oh, Gretta! I am not the sort of hero you painted. I'm a rough Australian; and all that I know of life in Europe, of art, and of romance—except the romance of loving you, and that seems to me the noblest and loveliest on earth—I've learned from books. But perhaps I know as much as most fellows of all that's worth knowing; and perhaps I'm all the better and truer for not being the product of civilisation. It seems to me that there's a kind of chivalry which can be practised in the bush here better than in great cities—the chivalry Tennyson writes about—the knighthood that isn't earned by sauntering through life in a graceful, smiling way with your heart in your hand, but in simplicity and faith, by love of one woman and reverence of all women for her sake. It may sound

high-flown and absurd, but that's how I feel in my love for you. It wakes up all the religion and enthusiasm that's in me.”

At the moment the young man's face seemed transfigured; his fine eyes glowed; his voice quivered with earnestness. Gretta's being was stirred. For a second its depths had been reached. The influences of the hour wrought upon her; the music sounding at intervals— weird bits of Chopin, snatches from Beethoven's sonatas, wild, strong, and with a burden so human and yearning, that every note chimed with the lover's pleading; the dim distance of plain and forest, the soft lapping of the water, as the ti-tree branches dipped deeper under their weight; the heavy perfume of datura flowers, the throbbing life which lurked beneath every leaf, and seemed to pulse with theirs.

Involuntarily, Gretta held forth her hands. They were clasped in his.

"Jem," she said in a shaken voice, "it is beautiful. It would be beautiful—if—if only I loved you."

"I've thought of that, Gretta. I'm not afraid if you'll trust me, and trust yourself. I know it's a received notion, a sort of canon of romance, that love should be a magnetic affinity, and that the passion should be equal on both sides. That isn't my idea. It doesn't seem to me natural that a gentle, innocent girl like you should have the almost uncontrollable feelings which tell a man that there's but one woman in the world for him. Durnford expresses what I mean in one of his poems. It's the lover's fiery all-embracing love which melts the woman's heart, and, by degrees, draws it into union with his own. *I know*," he

exclaimed vehemently, “that if we were married, if even we were engaged, after a little time you wouldn’t hesitate to own that you loved me. Gretta, wouldn’t it be so?”

“It might be so,” murmured Gretta, dreamily; “you’re very strong, Jem, stronger than I thought. Perhaps you could do it. You lift me off my feet—almost.”

The words fell brokenly. Gretta’s impulses were at war. To yield would be sweet. And yet A woman’s instinct is truer than a man’s logic. Silence followed, which wrapped them round, and, as it were, placed them in a shadowy circle, over which winged thoughts hovered. The music had ceased and the voices in the veranda died down to a murmur. Suddenly, a few brilliant chords resounded. Some one began to

sing. The sense of solitude was no more. It was a man's voice—Wyatt's—a tenor, rich and cultivated, and there was a trick about the song, an absence of rhyme and irregularity of stanza, a lawlessness and *entrain* which made it thrill Gretta's ears like no other song she had ever heard.

“Then come to me, come to me altogether,” uttered Ferguson, at the white heat of his longing.

He rose from the slab, still holding her hands, and drawing her upwards. For an instant Gretta swayed towards him. It was a moment of crisis. Was it the voice of her lover, or that of the singer which she obeyed?

*“For glance of thine, a world,
For smile of thine, a heaven
For kiss of thine . . .*

Passion broke the strain.

For kiss of thine . . .

And then, from wooing tenderness, the tones swelled as if in ecstasy.

*I know not
What I would give for a kiss.”*

Gretta wrenched her hands from Ferguson’s grasp.

“No, no!” she cried, “I cannot. I have been cruel. I have deceived you. I deceived myself for a few moments. I cannot love you. It was wicked of me to promise.”

She darted from him through the vines, and Ferguson stood alone by the lagoon.

CHAPTER V.

GOOD-BYE, GRETТА.

AT Doondi no one slept much after day-break.

First there was the roaring of the cattle imprisoned in the stockyard. It had indeed gone on without intermission all night, but seemed to intensify at dawn. Then came the loud cracking of the stock-whip, with which Mr. Reay awoke the station-hands. He himself was always first out, and prided himself upon the amount of gardening, beef-salting, or such

other work as was peculiar to the head station, which he accomplished before breakfast. Meanwhile the laughing jack-asses had started their chorus, and all the small birds were twittering. The dogs were on the alert, and black-boys' voices might be heard. Now, more cracking of whips, a stampede of horses on their way to the yards, and the lowing of milkers being fetched up from the paddock, and presently, the clatter of zinc pails which the boys were taking from the dairy to the stockyard.

This was Gretta's signal. To-day, as she came out of her bed-room, and stood in the fresh morning light, it might have been evident to any one who cared to notice her face that she had passed a sleepless night. She looked pale, and her eyes were heavy, and the lids reddened. But she would not admit to herself that it was

anything except the intense heat, which made her languid and nerveless.

The early hours gave pitiless warning of glare and discomfort. No dew had fallen during the night. A blue haze clung to the mountains, telling of distant bushfires. The red blossoms of a pomegranate-tree offended the eye, and already the more tender flowers drooped.

Gretta stepped down from the veranda into the little courtyard where Mr. Reay was tying up a straggling creeper.

"Good morning, Gretta," he called out; "I was coming to look after you. You're late this morning; and you'll have a job with the butter. Jack Clephane has gone off to Tieryboo in a fright lest the fires should get at his fences. Do you see them over Doonbah way?"

"Yes, father," said Gretta, listlessly, and passed on to the steps, at the foot of

which Maafu was standing with a pail of clear water that he had drawn from the waterbag.

“Take it down to the dairy, Maafu,” said Gretta, halting by the wicket—a pretty object in her blue cotton-gown and big apron, which partly concealed and partly drew attention to her slender form. She was gazing in the direction of the stockyard, trying to identify the coatless figures passing to and fro outside the great posts and battens. Among them she discerned that of Ferguson. He had not gone then! Glancing towards the veranda, she saw his saddle hanging over the rails, and his valise, unstrapped, beside it. The colour flamed in Gretta’s cheeks. He was coming down from the yard, leading his horse. She flew across to the dairy as he, seeing her, began to quicken his steps. Through the cheese-

cloth which covered the little window she furtively watched him saddle his horse and buckle on the valise. He bade Mr. Reay good-bye, then, still leading his horse, walked down to the bark-roofed hut, where Gretta stood making believe to be very busy with her milk-pans. Having fastened his bridle to the veranda-post he entered. He looked pale, too, under his sunburn, and worn—but his mouth was determined.

“I’ve come to bid you good-bye,” he said, “and I have a few words to say to you, Gretta, before I start, if you don’t mind. Would you rather I didn’t come over at Christmas, as we had arranged?”

“Oh, James!” she exclaimed, putting down the skimmer with which she had been operating, “we are going to be friends still, aren’t we?”

“We are going to be friends for ever,

I hope—no matter what happens. But I didn't know quite what you felt about last night, or whether you mightn't wish me out of your sight for a little while. Of course I'll do exactly as you wish, though I don't see that it need make any difference."

"No difference at all, James, if you'll put it out of your head and not be angry with me."

"I couldn't be angry with you, Grette, under any circumstances. But for the other—that's just what I want to say to you. I can't consider myself beaten, and I don't mean to give you up—I love you far too well."

He waited as if for a word from her, but she said nothing. He went on,

"I daresay you think me unmanly and conceited for my pertinacity. It doesn't matter. That won't alter me. I know

you like me a little bit or you would not look at me in the way you sometimes do. You wouldn't have put your hand in mine as you did last night —— ”

“ James,” interrupted Gretta, “ I'll tell you the truth. You mustn't place any dependence upon my manner. I can't help wishing people to like me, and liking them till they go too far. I am horribly impulsive ; and, as I said last night, I'm impressionable to a certain point. I don't know whether I shall ever get beyond that point. Sometimes I have fancied—last night for instance—that you had dragged me past it. But the feeling never lasts. I'm not worth caring for. I'm a weak, heartless creature.”

“ You are not heartless, Gretta ; and, please God, I'll prove it,” said Ferguson, solemnly.

“ I don't believe any person would

ever satisfy me," continued Gretta; "it's a dreadful confession, but it's true."

"How can you tell?"

"Oh, I often try to analyse myself. That's how I employ my mind when I am skimming the cream and turning the churn-handle. If I were married I suppose that my husband would want the whole of me. It would be impossible for us to touch at all points, especially if he were a squatter. I hate cattle. I should be putting feelers out in another direction. I'm very diffusive. I can't bottle up my impressions. If one person doesn't give me sympathy I must get it from another. Sometimes you draw out one bit of me, and then I think you might make me happy. The next day another side of my nature is uppermost, and you are—nowhere. In fact I'm as unreasonable as the cat in *Andersen's Tales*. I expect every one to

purr and give out sparks. I have no doubt I shall learn in time that it isn't actually necessary to happiness for your companions to be always purring and giving out sparks. But I haven't learnt the lesson yet. Do you understand? I want to see the world. I daresay that afterwards I may be contented to settle down on the Eura."

"I will show you the world. We will see it together."

"I spoke figuratively, James. I don't mean travelling from one country to another—at least, not entirely. But we cannot see the world in my way without making an experiment which might prove a failure."

"I will wait till you have made your experiment," said Ferguson.

"And have come back ready to put up with the second-best," rejoined Gretta, her

mind reverting to the episode of the previous evening.

“Ah!” said Ferguson, his eye brightening, “I feel, that, under the circumstances, with time and opportunity, I should be capable of taking the first place. Come to me after months, years, say to me ‘Jem, I have made a mess of my experiment, and I am obliged to fall back upon you.’ Just see, then, whether I should shrink from being your second-best?”

Gretta took up the skimmer again, and, slipping it beneath the clotted surface, dexterously separated cream from thick milk, and dropped the former into an earthen bowl by her side.

“Jem,” she said, seriously, “you must give me up.”

“No, Gretta,” he replied with equal gravity, “I’ll never do that while you are

unmarried. But I'll put a curb upon myself, and you shall be troubled no more—not for a long time, at all events—by any expression of my feelings. I'll wait and watch, and we will be brother and sister as we have always been.”

Gretta frankly put her hand in his for a moment.

“ Yes, Jem, brother and sister, and nothing else. Remember, I've told you to give it up. If I haven't been quite loyal to you, forgive me. It's a little hard for a girl like me to keep from flirting. The bush is dull, you know, and I never was staid like Mollie. I always wanted to have a good time, and to make cake out of my bread. You'll not remind me of yesterday evening, will you? I want to forget it. I was sorry—yes—I'll own it. I lay awake last night crying, and thinking that there *is* something

contemptible in letting men make love to me—getting what fun I can out of them, and then turning them away. . . . I don't think any of them bear me any grudge, though," she added, lightly, "not even Old Gold."

"It's that unconscious way you have, Gretta. I said so before. You don't seem to know when you are hurting people. You never seem to be aware of it, when you are doing a thing that is not conventional."

"You can't take Mrs. Grundy out riding with you, James. She would be out of place on the Eura."

"No," James hesitated for a moment—"but I think it would be better, Gretta, if you didn't sit out alone in the evening with fellows, down by the lagoon, as you do."

"Jem," said Gretta, solemnly, "if I

were to try and count upon my fingers how many men had proposed to me down by the lagoon I couldn't do it."

She passed on to another of the tin pans, and, drawing off its muslin covering, poured some water from Maafu's pail upon a shapeless curd-like mass of butter, yesterday's churning. She rolled up her sleeves, and looked down in perplexity at her hands, then up at the doorway, which a figure darkened. It was Bertram Wyatt.

"Good morning, Miss Reay. You see I have begun my training by getting up with the sun."

"Then you have been a long time dressing," said Gretta, "for the sun rose more than an hour ago."

"Oh, I've had a swim in the creek, and I stopped for a patter with the blacks. There's a romance down at the camp.

One Pompo, a most gay and gallant nigger, has eloped with a bride from over the border, who, being a Haggi—and he a Hippi—isn't that it, Miss Reay? has been forbidden him by his tribe. He is the hero of the hour, and the dusky pair are enjoying their honeymoon, worrying a kangaroo-tail and defying fate. Mrs. Pompo says that her lord is a 'budgery benjamin,' and he declares that he wouldn't exchange her for a White Mary. I wonder how long it will be before he hits her over the head with a waddy?"

Gretta laughed, but still looked at her hands.

"Mr. Wyatt," she exclaimed, "I want to scald my fingers. Perhaps you don't know that half the art of butter-making is to dip your hands first into very hot water and then into cold. As you are a

man and a brother go over to the kitchen and fill me this dipper out of the kettle."

Wyatt took the tin utensil which she held out to him and moved to do her bidding.

"I don't suppose," observed Gretta, thoughtfully, "that he is accustomed to being sent by girls to the kitchen for a dipper-full of water."

"Good-bye, Gretta."

"Must you go, Jem? Won't you have some breakfast first?"

"No, thank you. I shall get to the camp in time to boil a billy of tea before we start out."

"Have some milk, then. Here it is, fresh down from the yard."

Maafu had just entered and deposited a brimming pail upon the floor of the dairy.

Gretta filled a pannikin. He drank it.

“Don’t forget, Jem, that we are to see the New Year in from the top of Little Comongin range.”

“I’m coming over on Tuesday, Gretta. Remember what I said. Don’t be hard on people, dear. Don’t give any one the chance of being hard on you.”

Ferguson’s voice was husky. Gretta’s big, brown eyes softened; her lips drooped; she looked like a child who had been scolded.

“Jem, you’re not very unhappy? I couldn’t bear to think I had made you so. Oh, Jem, forget last night. There’s a real, steaming Christmas before us. Let us pray for thunderstorms and enjoy ourselves. I have a queer sort of feeling that Gretta Reay’s butterfly existence is coming to an end, and that her life is going to be a more serious sort of affair. Now, Maafu, quick! The strainer. Pour the

milk in steadily and don't splash my frock, Good-bye, Mr. Ferguson."

Gretta was herself again. She rarely called him Jem, except when they were alone or some deeper chord had been struck in their intercourse, although their joint relationship to Mrs. Blaize, and the freedom of their bringing-up, might at all times have sanctioned the familiarity.

Ferguson mounted his horse, and, passing through the upper sliprails, was soon lost to view. But his heart was heavy, and the image of Gretta among her milk-pans clung to him like a sorrowful memory.

CHAPTER VI.

LOBSTER-FISHING IN THE PADDOCK.

BEFORE a week had gone by both Isabel Gauntlett and Bertram Wyatt were thoroughly domesticated at Doondi.

It was not difficult to conform to the simple routine of the household. In reference to most things there reigned a delightful spirit of freedom, though it was easy to see that, with regard to station matters and questions of importance, Mr. Reay was an autocrat. Each member of the family seemed to have his or her

separate occupation, and in the daytime the head station was comparatively peaceful. Sib spent most of his time at the Selection, and the boys were all day at work with their tutor, who, in his turn, only put in an appearance after dinner. Of the three sisters, Mollie Clephane, absorbed in her needlework, her devotion to her husband, and her housewifely plans, was perhaps the most amiable and the least interesting. Gretta was the practical head of domestic affairs. Always bright, never idle, except during legitimate siesta time, with a laugh ready upon the smallest provocation, a quick perception of the ludicrous, and a pretty vein of sentiment, which gave womanliness to her character,—Gretta was a fascinating study to the English girl, who could not understand the utter unconvictionality, the childish audacity, the

worldly shrewdness, and the vivid imagination, of her Australian cousin. To Gretta, Isabel appeared stiff, and sometimes aggressively superior. Isabel did not take kindly to after-dinner rambles and fearless flirtation, the openness of which rescued it from the imputation of vulgarity, but which was, nevertheless, opposed to the notions of propriety which had been inculcated at Heatherleigh. In fact, they were both, as yet, a little afraid of each other, though each secretly admired the other.

Hester Murgatroyd seemed always distant and dreamy, a strange compound of impulsiveness and reserve, somewhat lazy in her habits, taking small part in the family jokes and amusements, yet giving the impression of a fund of enthusiasm held in leash by nervous dread of coldness or ridicule. She was of a meta-

physical turn of mind, and would spend hours of the afternoon, lying half-dressed at full length on the matting, a translation of the *Phædo* before her, and a plate of muscatel grapes by her side. There was a certain delicate sensuousness about Hester which contrasted oddly with her air of other-worldliness, and might have furnished a key to unsuspected capabilities of her nature. She was addicted to solitary rambles, in which no one ever proposed to join her. Once, when Isabel volunteered her company, she was nervously rebuffed, and Gretta exclaimed in a bantering tone :

“ Oh ! you must get used to Hester’s fads. She has a notion that it’s philosophical to walk by herself in a circle, and looks upon a round of the racecourse as the symbol of eternity. If you went with her you’d prevent her from ranting

among the gum-trees, and that would be a serious loss to the opossums."

Yet in the attitude of the whole family towards Hester there was a kind of wistful tolerance that was pathetic. No one seemed to expect anything from her, all made allowance for her peculiarities. Mr. Reay, hard in manner, and a disciplinarian towards all except the females of the Head Station, never interfered with his eldest daughter's pursuits or hinted that she might employ her time with greater advantage to the community. He was always gentle, if a little distant, in his manner to her, and occasionally consulted her upon an abstract topic, never upon anything closely related to their everyday life. She might have been a visitor, instead of being the ostensible head of the establishment, and it was very evident that there was no real sympathy between

blackboys and dogs ; and his return in the afternoon, 'mid such a cracking of whips, bellowing of beasts, and yelling of men, that it could be heard miles off, was the signal for Mr. Reay to leave the garden, or cultivation paddock, and repair to the yards, where he would have tough sticks and extra hands in readiness for the drafting. Isabel found it a curious experience to watch from afar the process of yarding a mob—the surging red-brown mass, a sea of tossing horns and labouring backs ; the outriders, their stockwhips writhing in the air, and at each stroke sending a report to echo through the gum-trees ; the wild dashes hither and thither ; the breakneck gallops after refractory beasts ; the uproar and confusion round the yard itself—men, horses, cattle, and brandished staves in wild medley ; then, when all was over, the jog down to the

house, the dismounting of grimy riders, the unsaddling of tired beasts, and bathing of their sun-baked ribs and inflamed backs with cold water from the cask ; and finally the sally down the creek, and, when the dinner-bell rang, the return of tired bushmen, refreshed, clean, reclothed, and in a sociable humour.

In the saddle from dawn to sundown, to say nothing of the physical exertion involved in yelling and stockwhip-cracking! It seemed to Isabel Gauntlett that the Eura squatters worked harder than any English labourer she had ever known.

Mr. Wyatt, as in duty bound, offered the mustering-party his help, but it was declined on the ground that, as he did not know the country, he could be of but little use. Glad enough was he to avail himself of the plea and to devote himself to the service of the ladies.

He found it a pleasant lounging sort of life. During the morning, a little desultory music with Isabel in the drawing-room, while Gretta would pass to and fro in her big apron and straw hat, occasionally calling upon him to gather a basket of grapes or to chastise a kangaroo-hound which threatened to damage the garden, or to shell a cob of indian corn for the regalement of the fowls outside the fence. Mrs. Clephane, in the veranda, sewed and chided Jinks; and Hester Murgatroyd wandered about rearranging the flowers, or reclined in the hammock with a book.

And then, in the afternoon, the siesta and smoke, the awakening at five o'clock, and saunter to the croquet-ground—for in the bush, in those days, tennis was not—the canter in the cool of the day, or the stroll by the creek in search of late mulgams, when, no matter how the party

had been reinforced, Gretta and Wyatt usually found themselves carrying on one of those dreamy conversations which, when prolonged under the orange-trees and down by the lagoon after dinner, made them know each other in a week as well as though their acquaintanceship had extended over years of ordinary intercourse.

It was the afternoon of the day upon which Mr. Ferguson and Mr. and Mrs. Blaize were expected, and the house-party were in the veranda, overcome with the heat and disinclined to move out of the squatters' chairs and hammocks. Jinks sidled up to Isabel and commenced conversation in her discursive fashion. Jinks had been a little less irrepressible of late, and spent a good deal of time in silently watching Isabel. Maafu had distinctly discouraged her scheme for

transforming herself into a "Fair one with golden locks," and his graphic representation of the obvious reasons in his own case for using lime-wash had somewhat disgusted her with the operation.

"Are you *stetic*? We are all getting *stetic* because my governess is going to be married, and she is working sun-flowers. Have you got lots of jewellery, and cups and saucers, and brittles, and things in your home in England? Tell me what your parlour is like."

Isabel described the drawing-room at Heatherleigh in a manner which set Jinks's imagination working, and brought forth many questions and remarks. What did she mean by curtains? Were they mosquito-curtains? They didn't have any others at Doondi. And who were the pictures of? And what was china?

And did she mean that the floor was *quite* covered with carpet, and that there wasn't a sewing-machine handy? And was she quite sure that tarantulas didn't get behind the rafters? Presently she asked briskly,

"Do you like craw-fishing?"

"Is that fishing in the creek?" said Isabel.

"No," said Jinks, with scorn; "it's only the blacks who catch things in the creek. I mean little lobsters—up in the paddock. I caught eight myself, and I lost the billy-can-lid in the hole. I have a beautiful mud-hole close by the stock-yard. It's all mud. There's lots more muddy ones; and, if you like craw-fishing, I'll take you there. Mr. Wyatt, you persuade Aunt Gretta to come and catch lobsters in the paddock."

Wyatt, thus appealed to, turned to Gretta.

"I'm open to enlightenment, Miss Reay. Catching lobsters in the paddock sounds a little mysterious. Your notions of sport at Doondi strike me as being rather elementary. Sib took me out shooting the other morning; we stalked the creek and discharged two barrels at an inoffensive row of ducks sitting upon a log. Then we came home again. We ate the ducks. Are we to eat the lobsters?"

"They're for Maafu," put in Jinks; "and Barty and I have supper with him."

"Let us go," said Gretta, jumping out of the hammock and tying on her hat.

They sallied forth—the boys, in the absence of their tutor, cracking the most inane jokes. Alas! Hester and Durnford

had agreed to meet in their cave—Jinks, in huge excitement, carrying a tin billy and some other utensils borrowed from the kitchen, the rest armed with short sticks, a ball of string, and some pieces of raw beef.

Near the stock-yard there lay a chain of muddy pools, not one deep enough to drown a kitten, but famous for the size and quality of the lobsters which lived in them.

Gretta gravely directed operations, appointing to each a station. Isabel and Wyatt face to face, with half a yard of mud between them, each holding a stick from which hung a string with a piece of meat tied on to it; Jinks established in her own preserve, and the boys wading in the slime, with cullenders ready to place under the prey. For the art of crawl-fishing consists in sitting still, with

your string suspended over the mud till two green claws stretch up and fasten on the bait. Then, with a sudden jerk, you draw up something like a small cray-fish, under which you adroitly place a cullender, or, with a swing backwards of the string, to which the creature clings like grim death, you land your prize upon the grass behind you.

The lobster is greedy and stupid, and no amount of noise scares him from the bait. Jinks's shrieks rung out freely.

"Oh, Uncle Joe! I've got one. He's a beauty. Here! Oh, my word! Hold the billy. Quick!"

Gretta dexterously landed one after another, laughing at Mr. Wyatt's clumsiness, and Isabel entered into the sport with the zest of a child, amused at the funniness of the whole proceeding, and the comical appearance they presented.

A distant roar of cattle and cracking of whips came nearer and nearer. Jinks put down her stick with a sigh of intense satisfaction, and ejaculated,

“ Oh, I wish Pat was here! He *does* so love craw-fishing.”

Then, in the next breath,

“ Oh, that’s him, riding along-side of the buggy; and there’s Aunt Judith and Mr. Ferguson.”

Craw-fishing was abandoned, and they all walked forward to meet the party from Gundalunda.

Mrs. Blaize, with her comely face, her blond curls, and deep, mushroom hat, seemed to Isabel like an old friend. She got down with alacrity from the buggy and enfolded, first the English girl and then her nieces, in a motherly embrace.

“ And now, I must see to my old man,” she said, “ for he has just been ailing ever

since you left us, Isabel, and needs a deal of coddling."

Mr. Blaize, protected by his green umbrella, and a deep calico frill round his broad-brimmed hat, looked frailer and more wizened than ever. When he alighted upon the ground he shook himself much as a bird might have done, and cast a wistful glance at Gretta, and smiled pathetically at Isabel. He shuddered when Mr. Reay came up, with his legs swinging like a pair of compasses, linked the old man under his arm, and led him down towards the house. Poor Mr. Blaize kept pace for a minute, and then stopped, bleating,

"I daresay now Miss Gauntlett will give me an arm, Mr. Reay, for I'm a little slow for you—and"—with the upward alert look—"I always think myself, that

the sun is very hot in December ; and a journey is a tiring thing."

Meanwhile, Pat Desmond, after having, so to speak, put himself at the ladies' feet, snatched up Jinks, and galloped back to the hill beyond the stockyard, where a mounted white man and several blacks guarded a mob of tired-looking cattle.

The man's face was turned towards Doondi House. His features were undistinguishable, but Isabel recognised the easy carriage of head and shoulders which suggested so unmistakeably the English gentleman, and the short brown beard and heavy moustache.

She knew that it was Braddick the miner.

CHAPTER VII.

THE NEW DROVER.

AT dusk, Isabel and Gretta, gathering breast-knots in the courtyard, saw Braddick approaching from the stockyard.

He had put a coat on over his rough, stockman's clothes. He carried his stockwhip and a bundle of ration-bags. His eyes were lowered till he neared the palisade, and then he kept them steadily averted from the young girls.

The store-door was open, and Mr. Reay stood near, at the end of the veranda.

On the supposition that the newcomer was one of Desmond's hands in want of rations he called out—

“Well, my man. Have you got the cattle yarded? They seem a wildish lot.”

“We had a good deal of trouble with them, sir,” returned Braddick. “They broke several times.”

“They'll join the tailing mob to-morrow—that'll quiet them. And we shall slack work here till after Christmas. You'll want some plums and goodies I suppose. Ha!” as, during a more attentive scrutiny, something in Braddick's gait arrested him. “You are Mr. Desmond's mate, ain't you? From Wyeroo? Perhaps you were going to send in your name?”

Braddick laughed in an unmirthful sarcastic fashion. He was well aware of the Australian etiquette. If a traveller

sends in his name to the master of the head station it is presumed that he is to be treated as an equal. Should he fail to do so he has no right to complain at being sent to the huts.

"My name is Braddick," he said, shortly; "I had not intended to send it in. Mr. Desmond engaged me to help in the muster here, and told me that I might perhaps get employment in the over-landing trip. I am, of course, anxious to accommodate myself to your arrangements. I meant to camp out. I have my tent, and came down for rations."

Gretta started when he began to speak, and stood in a listening attitude.

"That man is a gentleman," said she, decidedly; "I know it by his voice. He is an Englishman, probably far better born and bred than we ourselves. Oh! many of them go by to and fro from the

diggings and ask for work—Oxford and Cambridge men. It's quite melancholy to see the straits they are reduced to. I hope father won't make a mistake and send him to the kitchen."

She moved forward, drawing Isabel with her. Braddick looked towards them, first raised his hat, and then, meeting Isabel's eyes, made a second grave salutation.

The young girl bowed. Her heart had thrilled to the note of sad irony in his voice. A gentleman! Could there have been an instant of doubt? She felt almost angry with Mr. Reay for his obtuseness. Quick darting sympathy, which a moment later seemed ridiculous, conveyed to her that Braddick felt his position keenly, and that her presence heightened the contrast between the

“ then ” and the “ now,” and inflicted an additional stab of humiliation.

“ Miss Gauntlett,” exclaimed Mr. Reay, “ You have met—Mr. Braddick ? ”

“ Mr. Braddick saved —— ” began Isabel, and ended lamely—“ did me a great service the day I went down the mine at Wyeroo.”

She halted, from an indefinable feeling that any strong expression of gratitude would be out of place.

“ How ? What ? ” inquired Gretta, her curiosity on the alert. She had already contrived to intimate dumbly to her father that the stranger was to be invited to the house.

“ Miss Gauntlett overrates a most trifling matter as far as I was concerned,” said Braddick, coldly ; “ I merely pulled her away—very roughly I fear—from a heap of falling stone. I cannot find Mr.

Desmond," he went on hurriedly. "I don't suppose there are any more directions about the cattle, and I had better make my camp."

"Desmond is at the Bachelors' Quarters," said Mr. Reay, pointing thither, "or more likely, just now in the creek. You'll find a bunk over there, and dinner prepared, Mr. Braddick. I hope you'll accommodate yourself to your satisfaction, and give up the notion of camping. Squatting out of doors, with a Eura storm brewing, isn't an agreeable sort of proceeding—at least, I don't think so; and you'll please to understand, Mr. Braddick, that my daughters will be glad to see you at the house, if you'll care to walk down, for some music by-and-bye."

"I hope you'll come," interposed Gretta, with her little air of stately friendliness.

"Thank you," answered Braddick;

"you are very kind. I had not intended," he began, in his tone of proud humility, and stopped. A curious expression stole over his face, and a far-away look into his eyes, as they turned towards the two girls, and dwelt lingeringly upon Isabel's Madonna-like face, upon her slim figure, and all the dainty adjuncts of her dress.

"Yes, I will come," he said, in quite a different manner; "I am much obliged to you for the invitation."

And without any further words he lifted his hat again and walked to the Bachelors' Quarters.

A storm was threatening. After dinner, for a short time, Gretta and Wyatt stood in the veranda, watching the lightning as it played over Comongin, while Ferguson found poor balm for his

wounded spirit in conversing with Isabel; and Sebastian, who had ridden over for Christmas from the Selection, sat, as was his custom, among the knot of bushmen, every now and then putting a word into the talk about "Nash's mob," and straining his ears to catch Isabel's low-toned utterances.

Presently the storm burst, and the rain, beating in at the veranda, drove them to join the elders in the parlour. As they entered by the French window, the gentlemen from the Bachelors' Quarters came in from the back.

Pat Desmond, his jolly Irish face alight, his tongue in full swing, was in advance.

"Well, Mrs. Clephane, and how are you? And Miss Gretta? You see I couldn't keep away from you—not even long enough to smoke my pipe and have

a yarn with Durnford. Are you getting over your shaking, Mr. Blaize? Sure, and they told me you'd gone to bed to draw your last breath; and I said, 'Anyhow, I'll be in for the wake.' "

"Pat," said Aunt Judith, with dignity, "if you're ever in need of any information about anything that's worth knowing, you can't do better than apply to my husband, for when he isn't snoozing he is reading, and when he isn't reading he is meditating on what he has read. But, let me warn you, Mr. Blaize is not a man to stand your flippant jokes, and you'd do well not to trifle with his rest."

"My dear," murmured the white-haired, little man, rousing himself from the depths of a squatter's chair, "don't check the young people. I always think myself that merriment in the young is a sign of health and happiness."

Pat sidled up to Gretta.

“Ah, this road is full of memories,” he said, dropping his voice sentimentally.

“Do you recollect the last time I rode back with you from Gundalunda, and had to leave you at the sliprails, and gallop home in time for work at day-break?—Yes, sir,”—in a louder key—“I’ve turned my horses out; the upper paddock; right, isn’t it?”

Braddick and Durnford made their greetings more quietly. The former had exchanged his rough garments for a dark suit, which showed signs of wear and of much creasing, but in which it was difficult to identify him with the working miner or the travelling drover. His manner was very quiet, a little stiff, but perfectly well-bred. One after the other, the sisters spoke to him with the kindly intention of setting him at ease, and, in

surprise, changed their tone, discovering that he was perfectly self-possessed and evidently a man of culture, though the latter fact he seemed desirous of keeping in the background, for he hesitated and withdrew from a discussion which Clephane and Wyatt had started upon a mooted point in modern art, after having made a remark or two which betrayed a thorough acquaintance with the bearings of the subject.

It seemed an unnatural proceeding to spend a summer evening within doors at Doondi, and a little restraint hung over the party. Gretta was not herself. Ferguson noticed that her laughter sounded forced, and that she had fits of thoughtfulness not usual with her. Nor was she so ready in exchanging bantering remarks with Wyatt concerning his pupilage in bush-ways as had been the case a week

ago. James, on his side, was spasmodic in his dashes at conversation; and his effort to behave as though nothing had happened was rather a failure.

Mr. Reay, Captain Clephane, and Sib sat down to a game of whist, at which the poet made a fourth. There was a call upon Isabel for a "tune" from Mr. Reay; and, as she softly played the ballet music from *Romeo e Giulietta*, Braddick left his place by a round table where he had been turning over a collection of English magazines, and took a seat beside the piano. He did not speak even when she had ended the movement and let her hands drop in her lap. The rain pattering on the roof, the low growling of thunder, and buzzing of insects, which rushed in thousands to the light, made a chorus in keeping with the muggy atmosphere and with the

dreamy excitement which this man's presence aroused in her. She began again to play some disjointed chords, and started violently as a winged cockroach alighted on the music-stand. Braddick dexterously covered it with his handkerchief and took it to the window.

"There are two aspects to a tropical evening," he said, as he resumed his place. "When one reads of balmy breezes, waving palms, perennial greenery, and southern moonlight, one is apt to forget prickly heat, thunderstorms, mosquitoes, and such trifling discomforts."

"It would be easy to make a very big entomological collection in this room," said Isabel, with a nervous laugh; "I am fascinated by those uncanny flying ants which shuffle off their wings and leave them loose on the table-cloth. I

feel like Alice in Wonderland," she added ;
"and I can hardly imagine that to-morrow will be Christmas Eve."

By a natural sequence their talk drifted to the various modes of celebrating Christmas, and Isabel, alluding to some ancient Devonshire customs, was astonished to find the miner primed with information concerning the county and its inhabitants.

"You know Devonshire well?" she exclaimed.

"South Devon?—Yes. I was quartered at Plymouth for a year, and my home was——" he halted abruptly.

"One gets to know the ins and outs of a county by making walking-tours and fishing in out-of-the-way villages. And you?" he asked, with a bright gleam of interest lighting his face, "is that where you live? There were Gauntletts in

Suffolk, I remember," and he paused again.

"You mean my cousin—at Bretherton. That is in Suffolk. We were in London till my father died: and then I went to my sister at Heatherleigh. It is about fourteen miles from Plymouth."

"Your sister is Lady Hetherington? I recollect. Sir Richard was master of the hounds. Has he them still?"

"Oh yes. He would be lost without the occupation."

There was a little silence. Isabel plunged into a waltz of Chopin's. She longed to ask him if he were acquainted with her brother-in-law, but something held her back. At last, going back upon the dreamy prelude, she said, abruptly,

"Mr. Braddick, it is very strange. The first time I saw you—in the mine—I felt

sure you were—sure that you had come from England.”

“Most of the men knocking about Wyeroo, who seek their fortune in my sort of irregular way, come from England, as Mr. Desmond will tell you. There’s nothing strange about that.”

“Perhaps not. But it is odd that you should know my country and my people. I daresay that you have met my sister and my brother-in-law.”

“I have seen them,” replied Braddick, shortly.

“Perhaps,” continued Isabel, “we have other interests in common. Your friends may be mine. At least,” she added simply, “I was not very intimate with any of our neighbours except those quite near, for I had not been long out of the school-room when I got ill. But it is most likely that my sister ——”

"Not at all likely," interrupted Braddick; "I have no friends in England."

"Still, if you were quartered at Plymouth? The officers always visit a good deal at the country-houses round about."

"Why do you imagine that I must necessarily have been an officer?" he asked, coolly. "It is much more natural that you should think of me as a common soldier."

"No, that I am sure you were not," returned Isabel, with girlish frankness. "You couldn't honestly assure me that you were not ——"

"A gentleman," he said, filling up the blank. "It is possible for a common soldier to be a gentleman, as well as a miner or drover, is it not? But we need not go into that question. I am flattered by your good opinion, Miss Gauntlett, but indeed I can honestly assure you that I

feel more at home in the men's tent than in a lady's drawing-room. By the way, I am indebted to your recognition of me for my kind reception here."

"Oh no," said Isabel, colouring; "Miss Reay was certain a mistake had been made."

"No one made a mistake. I daresay you have already learned something about Australian formalities. There are not many, but one at any rate is stringently observed. I never send in my name at a station. I have always preferred that it should be taken for granted I am a working-man. But for you and Miss Reay I should have been camping-out to-night, and my Christmas prospects would have seemed very different. I don't know that I have been wise."

"Not wise? Surely this is better than camping-out—on such a night?"

“Oh, yes! I grant you it is delightful—delightful to hear Chopin played in this way—delightful to see the dear old *Blackwood* and *Temple Bar*, and all the odds and ends, flowers and nick-nacks; delightful to be received on terms of equality by ladies in evening dress, who suggest visions out of dreamland. Good Heavens!” and he gave himself a little shake, “it is like a dream. But there’s always something cold and depressing about the waking-up.”

“I am sorry,” said Isabel, gently, and their eyes met as she went on playing. His gaze lingered long after hers had drooped.

“How clever you are!” he said, “to play and listen and talk all at the same time.”

“Oh!” she answered, dwelling upon an arpeggio chord, “this is my ‘talking

music,' I know it so well; and now it is over, and Mr. Wyatt is going to sing."

She got up, and Wyatt, under protest, took her place.

"This is the thing I meant, Miss Reay," he said, and struck a few lame chords, trolling forth with great spirit the opening bars of a German student's song.

"It's no use; I can't manage the accompaniment," he exclaimed, rising, "and Miss Gauntlett is helpless without the notes, which I haven't got."

"I'll play your accompaniment," said Braddick. "I used to know the song well—that is if you like to try me. I haven't touched the piano for years."

Wyatt looked surprised, and bestowed an instant's careful scrutiny on the miner. Braddick sustained it without change of

a muscle. A queer gleam of comprehension shone in Wyatt's eyes. "The man's a real chap," was his unspoken thought.

"Thank you," he said, simply; "I am in luck. If you know that song you must know a great deal besides in the way of music. By Jove!" he ejaculated aside, as Braddick put his hands on the keys with the air of a master, and preluded with great power and delicacy, then took up the refrain and suppressed his own individuality, as a good accompanist is bound to do.

They were all delighted, and proffered eager congratulations. Captain Clephane cried "Bravo" from the whist-table, and speedily arrived at the same conclusion concerning the new hand as that which the others had already formed. The whist-party dispersed; grog and cake

were brought in, and grapes and wine handed to the ladies. Song followed song, and then all the musical ones joined round the piano, and lifted their voices in a Christmas carol, at which the tears rushed to Mr. Blaize's eyes, and the old man nodded gently in time to the music. Hester and Durnford sat a little apart, and talked in low tones during the intervals and under cover of the piano. Every now and then, during a lull, voices here and there would sound distinctly. Gretta in soft duologue with Wyatt; Mollie Clephane in domestic confabulation with Mrs. Blaize. "Jack says that Jinks is being ruined by Miss Barham. We put an advertisement in the paper and had twenty-five letters—people begging to come—but Jack says he couldn't be bothered with a new one; and Miss Barham cried, and so we shall keep her

till her marriage," &c . . . And then, later, Aunt Judith, in tearful impressive tones, in her anxiety quite oblivious of the fact that Braddick was playing pianissimo—"Well, have you heard anything of Lance Murgatroyd since he got out? Look here, Mollie, I am just breaking my heart about it all. There's a report that he has turned bushranger; and to think of his being poor Hester's husband ——"

"Aunt Judith," cried Gretta, wildly, "do you know that the drays haven't arrived yet, and we have nothing in the store for Christmas?"

Mr. Braddick had looked up from the piano in a quick wondering way at the mention of Lance Murgatroyd's name, first at Mrs. Blaize, and then at Hester, whose crimson face told of the pain and mortification she was enduring. He

brought his hands down with a big crash. There was a general move, and Mrs. Blaize, in remorse and confusion, began the good nights.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHRISTMAS CAKES.

It was the morning of the 24th of December, and the Doondi drays laden with stores from Leichardt's Town had not yet arrived. Groceries were at a low ebb on the station; the cognac had run out, there were wanting white sugar, candied peel, plums, and many other ingredients of the great Christmas cake and pudding, the annual triumph of Mrs. Blaize and Mollie Clephane. Alas! cake and pudding, as all good housewives are

aware, should have been made a week ago, but the drays had been daily, almost hourly, expected, and Gretta—practical, energetic Gretta—had not been quite herself of late, and had failed to grapple promptly, as was her wont, with the emergency.

Oh, what a sweltering day it was! The rain of the night before rose in steam from the ground. The sun beat as it were through a wet blanket. Myriads of flies clung stickily to an empty sugar-mat set forth as a trap. The big kangaroo-hound, stretched in the shade of a vine, did not even bestir himself at Maafu's cry. "Hou! Hou! Fowl in de garden!" but only yapped lazily as if to say, "Just you wait till I get up," a warning which the chickabiddies did not mind in the least. A brisk little Willy wagtail hopping about on the gravel seemed the

only creature not overpowered by the heat. Work had been struck as far as the upper "hands" were concerned, and the "tailing mob" put in charge of a stockman and the blackboys. Most of the party had gathered in the back veranda, Mollie at her sewing-machine, the baby sprawling at her feet; Isabel dressing a doll for Jinks; Sib crushing indian corn; Ferguson, Clephane, Braddick and Pat Desmond plaiting thongs of green hide, punching holes in saddle-straps, and tinkering saddlery; Wyatt assisting Gretta in the store to weigh out little bagfulls of tea and sugar, the Christmas bounty to the blacks. Jinks and the boys were consoling themselves over a huge watermelon; and Mrs. Blaize, standing by the open kitchen window, was ruefully contemplating a basin of eggs, the accumulation of weeks, and ejaculating, disconsolately,

"Such is life! Waiting! Waiting!" while Pat Desmond made the cheering suggestion that he and Braddick should ride over and forage at the nearest station.

But at that moment the cracking of stock-whips, and a volley of bullock-driver's oaths, borne faintly on the still air, told that the drays were approaching.

In a few minutes two heavily-laden wagons, drawn by oxen, were brought to a standstill outside the palisade. Mr. Reay came out of his office, and in his disjointed fashion cut short an explanation on the part of the men, in which "Captain Rainbow," "that there darned strawberry bullock, which yokes and hobbles wouldn't keep close to a camp," and the "Gin Gin Crossing up to its banks," were prominent features.

"Come now," said the master, "that's

all a pack of havers. Don't you talk to me of bushrangers on the Eura! You've been on the spree at the half-way public-house, and you've made a pretty close shave of Christmas. Talk of that by-and-bye. A nobbler a-piece for you, and look sharp about unloading."

The rum was served out; the bullocks unyoked; the gentlemen ran out to assist in removing the tarpaulins, and soon the veranda was strewn with boxes and barrels, sacks of flour and mats of ration sugar. Gretta pounced upon the case of groceries which Desmond prized open; and then, with the air of a general reviewing a raw army, she addressed her recruits—

"Now, if you *care* about a proper Christmas dinner, you must all set to work, and help us to cook, or, if you prefer it, we'll send to the blacks' camp

and have some gins up to stone the raisins."

Groans and protests greeted this proposition.

"Sure, Miss Gretta," cried Pat, "av it's more than five able-bodied men can do to stone the raisins—not counting Mr. Blaize and Jinks—here's Mr. Gustavus to make a sixth."

The inspector of mines appeared at the kitchen door. He had just hung up his horse, and looked even yellower than usual, by reason of a pair of buff corduroys and a straw-coloured alpaca coat which he wore with apparent satisfaction. Joe irreverently began to sing under his breath,

"Dyspepsy would a-mooing go;"

while Mr. Gustavus made his bow to the ladies, explaining that having found Gundalunda deserted he had ridden

over, relying upon the proverbial hospitality of Doondi, and Jinks artlessly inquired—

“Has your enemy made you sick lately Mr. Gustavus?”

“Indeed, then, your enemy’s likely to get the best of you here,” observed Mrs. Blaize, grimly, as with a butcher’s knife she divided a lump of suet, and then in a stage aside murmured to Braddick, “It’s the coats of his stomach. Take my advice, Gustavus, and keep out of the kitchen.”

*“The wise and active conquer difficulties
By daring to attempt them: sloth and folly
Shiver and shrink at sight of toil and hazard,”*

gallantly spouted Mr. Gustavus. “Apportion to me my task, Miss Gretta. Command, I am thy servant.”

Presently, after a comprehensive gaze round, he stepped across to Durnford, who

was leaning against a veranda-post, and whispered, with his hand to his ear—

“Who is that man talking to Miss Gauntlett?”

“His name is Braddick,” shortly replied the poet, who did not like Mr. Blaize.

“He has no business among the ladies,” said the inspector; “he has been working at the diggings.”

“So has Pat Desmond,” rejoined Durnford.

“Pat knows his position. That fellow is a gentleman and won’t acknowledge it. I have seen him at places on my rounds, and he was always with the men in the huts. This is the only station I know where he has given his name. There’s a mystery, believe me. But what puzzles me is that his face is connected, in my mind, with England,

though I can't recollect how or where I've seen it. A man of my vast social experience in both hemispheres, Durnford, finds a difficulty in tabulating his impressions. I shall make it my business to ransack my memory."

"I have not the least doubt that Mr. Braddick's private affairs will not long be a mystery to you," said Durnford, pointedly.

"Mr. Gustavus," cried Gretta, coming forward and presenting him with a meat-board and a chopper, "no idle conversation allowed. Here's some suet for you to mince, and please be very careful to do it finely. Aunt Judith, you and Mollie take command, weigh, and mix. Mr. Durnford and Miss Gauntlett, stone raisins. Hester, blanch almonds. Pat and Jinks, beat up butter, grease cake-tins, and wash currants. Mr. Wyatt,

you take the whites of the eggs, and Mr. Braddick the yolks. Here's a whisk a-piece for you, and I recommend you to sit in the veranda without your coats. And Mr. Ferguson," she turned a little shyly to James, "perhaps you will help me to sift the flour and sugar?"

Never was a merrier morning spent. After a hurried luncheon there was a fresh adjournment to the kitchen, and by four o'clock the cakes were in the oven and the pudding shrouded for the pot. A bathe and a lounge had been well earned. At half-past five the scene shifted to the wide, shady veranda of the Bachelors' Quarters, where the thermometer was discovered to be only 100°, one degree lower than the reading at the big house.

Mr. Durnford, Joe, and Mark did the honours of the school-room, and handed

tea and fruit to the ladies who were in hammocks outside. Sib dipped Isabel's pocket-handkerchief in the water-bag, sprinkled it with eau-de-Cologne, and, as she held it to her face, fanned her with a banana leaf. Wyatt performed the same office for Gretta. Pat Desmond and Jinks had climbed upon a rafter and were firing millet-grains at each other out of a pea-shooter, while Mr. Gustavus sprawled elegantly on a canvas-stretcher and read in sonorous tones,

*" They who say the bush is dull are not so very far astray,
For this eucalyptic cloisterdom is anything but gay;
But its merciful dulness I contentedly could brook
If I only could get back my lost lamented Chinese cook.*

*" We got fat upon his cooking, we were happy in those days,
For he tickled up our palates in a thousand pleasant ways;
Oh, his dinners! Oh, his dinners! they were fit for any duke,
Oh, delectable Mongolian! Oh, celestial Chinese cook."*

"Eucalyptic cloisterdom!" echoed Gretta. "That's a nice, expressive term—very applicable to life on the Eura.

Sib, I declare there's a breeze springing up. Saddle the horses and let us ride to the Gorge. I want some ferns and hoyas for Christmas decorations. *Cooee!*" she cried, espying a black boy in the distance, and sending forth her sweet, fresh voice. The boy turned and ran at her call. "Drive in yarraman, Combo," said Gretta; "marra make haste. Altogether White Mary ride along a Gorge."

Within, Hester poured out tea, and composedly cut bread and butter; but she took no part in the conversation, answering absently when Braddick, who had installed himself at her side, asked her a question, and wondering dimly why he attached himself to her, and why he looked at her so often and in so perplexed a manner. She felt a dreamy pleasure in the thought that she was Durnford's guest, and her eyes noted

with quickened interest the rough bush furniture, the books on their shelves, the dust, the canvas armchair—all the homely appliances of the bachelors' room over which love cast now such a strange glamour. This was where he had spent his long lonely evenings, where he had thought of her, where he had written out his heart's yearning, and where he had battled with his love, and had, for her sake, decided to leave her. She watched him as he moved about. He was so quiet, so gentle, so full of the refinement which she often fancied was lacking in her surroundings, and yet, withal, he was so manly. His sedulous care that no word or gesture on his part should draw towards her compromising remark moved her at once to gratitude and resentment. She felt, at the moment, a wild desire to rise and announce their relations towards

each other ; to brave misconstruction and conventionality, and claim the right to recognition of a noble love, which should be its own justification.

But no pure woman, even though she may have gone through an experimental marriage, is capable of loving with absolute self-consciousness. Her emotions are, to her, a source of wonder, tumult, and vacillation. Constitution and training render her unable to grasp the position. She is alternately the victim of impulse and reaction. She theorises boldly upon the lawfulness of spiritual passion and its independence of material satisfaction, and thus may recklessly rush to the very brink of a precipice ; but all the while she feels an underlying sense of moral guilt, and a terror of the human instincts which imperiously assert themselves after a certain

critical point has been reached in her intercourse with the man whom she loves.

To this point Hester was hurrying. Each secret meeting with Durnford at the cave, each passionate glance of his which she intercepted, each question and doubt against which she struggled, brought her nearer to the moment in which she should realise her danger.

CHAPTER IX.

BY MOONLIGHT.

THE breeze had freshened into a keen wind, bringing the most delicious sense of coolness and exhilaration. There had evidently been severe storms in other parts of the district. The smoky haze had disappeared from the mountains; and the stifling heat no longer oppressed like a leaden pall.

It was almost dusk when the little band passed through the sliprails, Pat Desmond and the boys ahead, making the bush ring

with a jolly Irish chorus, in which now and then Gretta, Wyatt, and one or two of the others joined; the horses stepping briskly, tossing their manes and coquetishly curveting as though they had caught the spirit of their riders. All were merry; there was a fire of would-be clever sayings, and the feeblest witticisms were greeted with peals of laughter.

They paused for a minute in the bed of the creek; the horses plashed with their hoofs and champed their curbs in the running water, which made music as it rushed over the stones. A moon near her full shed broken beams through the chestnut-trees from which the long pods hung like mis-shapen fruit; the thirsty arums sucked in the moisture, erect, unsheathing their golden hearts; and the prickly yellow cactus lining the banks shed its musky fragrance upon the air.

Howling and sounds of woe proceeded from the blacks' camp opposite. The riders halted at a few yards' distance, and Sib and Wyatt dismounted to investigate matters. It was a picturesque scene—the fires leaping up and illuminating the green little gunyas, the groups of swarthy figures, and the imp-like piccaninnies, who rushed to and fro, and peered at the white men from behind the gum-trees. In front of an outside gunya, whence the wailing sounded, three or four indignant gins vociferated round an angry warrior, who tragically flourished a nulla nulla, and muttered aboriginal oaths; while King Comongin, enthroned upon a possum skin, blear-eyed, white-haired, and nude to the waist, his tattooed chest and brass plate—the insignia of royalty—showing in the glow, sat, philosophically callous to the disturbance, playing at

cards with three other dusky elders for a miscellaneous stake, to which each had contributed a bit of tobacco, a half-cooked bone, a piece of sugar-bag, and the rusty blade of an old knife.

“So much for the romance of the camp, Miss Reay,” said Wyatt. “Pompo my hero has been banging his bride about the head with a waddy. Remorse has overtaken him ; he believes that an avenging debbil debbil is going to punish him for his breaking of the law, and this had led to a misunderstanding. You see in this case conjugal felicity did not last long.”

Gretta rebuked the delinquent in the odd dialect which prevails between white and black, and which Wyatt and Ferguson both thought sounded so quaint from her pretty lips. Mrs. Pompo came forth from the gunyah at the sound of

Gretta's voice—a melancholy object, with her nose bleeding and her forehead cut.

“Baal that fellow budgery, Benjamin,” cried she, pointing to Pompo; “missus, you tell that fellow him no good—too much mumkull—too much saucy.”

Whereupon Pompo broke in,

“Sar, I b’lieve debbil debbil cobbon coolla belonging to me. What for mine mine run away with that fellow gin? Baal mine pidney. I b’lievè debbil debbil marra Pompo. Mine close-up bong.”

At this tragic suggestion there was a universal howl, and King Comongin, who had till now preserved a dignified silence, opined gravely that Massa Reay was a budgery medicine man.

“Suppose massa pialla debbil debbil, that fellow baal coolla belonging to Pompo.”

Then Gretta promised solemnly, in her

father's name, that the "debbil debbil" should be "pialla'd" that very night, and delivered an harangue upon the duties of married life. Peace was restored between the bride and bridegroom, and all the members of the camp were invited to the station on the evening of the morrow, when it was promised they should receive the Christmas bounty of rations and "toombacco."

On cantered the young people, in wilder frolic than before. But gradually, as the hills closed on the creek, and the track obliged them to ride by twos, the noise subsided into duets, and the Irish chorus pealed back faintly only now and then when the cliffs no longer interposed between the leaders and their followers. They came to a ghostly-looking flat, with hills rising like an amphitheatre before them, and tall, dead gums, keeping

guard like sentinels at the entrance to the gorge. The moon cast strange shadows and etherialised the girls' faces as they shook their horses' reins and darted forward in a stretching canter.

"Mind the paddy-melon holes!" shouted Sib, seizing Isabel's bridle for an instant, and turning her horse's head so that he and she rode abreast. At the sentinel gums they dismounted, and, leaving their horses in the charge of Ferguson, who had volunteered the service, entered the mysterious cleft where rocks, tapestried with hoyá and mountain-creepers, rose high on either side, and a clear little stream flowed along a bed of rock, smooth as the paved aisle of a church.

The forms vanished between the jaws of the ravine, but the voices echoed back Gretta's pearly tones, Isabel's gentle

laughter, Wyatt's refined, English intonation, and Mr. Gustavus's bass. Ferguson laid his head against the mane of Gretta's mare Brunette and stroked the animal's hide and sought sympathy in the beast's great, pitiful eyes. His heart was sick and sore.

"It's all up with me," he murmured; "she's getting to care for Bertram and I've no chance now. Damn him!" he exclaimed, but the imprecation was sorrowful rather than angry, and it was with a sort of shock that James pulled himself up. "*She's* too good to be a man's second best. That's what I mean," he said, under his breath. "But if he loves her—God bless her! Nothing matters provided she is happy."

It seemed a long time before the explorers came back. Ferguson sat with his back against a boulder, and as he held

the horses' bridles, and mechanically loosened and tightened the reins, so that Brunette might snap at a young twig, or another stoop to a rill of water, his misery seemed to quicken his insight, and to bring him into wider sympathy with his fellows, so that he could dimly imagine what was passing in the hearts of those who had left him, and wondered how many key-notes had been struck that night which should determine the harmonies or discords of their future lives.

When they returned, the men's arms were filled with withes of hoyá and red kennedia, tufts of parasite lilies, Australian mistletoe, and sheaves of fern; and they brought with them the scent of wild jasmine and of many rock-flowers. Braddick was not laden like the rest, but he held in his hand a little cluster of jessamine which had dropped from

Isabel's breast. He lifted her to the saddle, and they cantered side by side across the flat. It was a weird ride. The bitterns shrieked, and night-birds sent forth wailing cries of "Maw-pawk—Maw-pawk." And now again they were in the shadow of the hills, crossing and re-crossing the flagged creek-bed, and riding beside still dark pools, into which dead logs dipped like uncanny reptiles. Suddenly the moon became obscured by a driving cloud, and a fantastic tremor seized Isabel, so that she shivered.

Braddick paused in his talk. It was of music. Strange! When this subject was touched upon by her he seemed to cast aside a restraint which at other times girded him, and spoke with that melancholy enthusiasm that seemed aroused by the thought of past experience, in which acute joy and acute pain were blended.

A subtle sympathy made Isabel aware that such memories of his were connected with music, and that she had unconsciously touched a spring which set them vibrating.

“You are cold?” he asked.

“Oh, no! On such a dry delicious night? I was only thinking how different this ride is from anything I ever did at Heatherleigh, and a fancy struck me—it often does—I wonder if you ever feel the same — that this is like a vivid dream.”

Braddick gave his shoulders a queer little shake, and said, with his face turned from her—

“Life has seemed to me all a dream since I left England—sometimes a very unpleasant nightmare—and I have wished that it would change into a deep sleep, from which I might never awake.”

"Oh !" uttered Isabel, shrinking as if pained; and looking round he saw that her eyes were resting upon him with wistful interest.

"You mustn't waste sympathy on me," he said, in a grave voice, which had in it no lightness or mockery; "it is true that I have felt the wish to end everything, but that is a cowardly and contemptible sort of sentiment. Life is a noble thing in itself; I didn't think so a little while ago, but I am gradually getting to the belief. At any rate, it has to be lived out, *tant bien que mal*; and the Eastern sage was right when he said, "Death is a thing desirable when it comes, but not to be desired."

"I once felt in that way," said Isabel, softly. "It was when I had been very ill, and was so weak that to slip away from earth seemed easiest and best. I

think it is a feeling which comes after sickness or great sorrow."

"And now?" he asked, ignoring the latter part of her sentence. "You have got over it? You are strong and happy? If there is any one in the world who ought to be purely, serenely happy, it is *you*."

"Why?" she asked, innocently.

"I suppose it is certain that the highest joy comes from the consciousness of being able to do good to others," he answered, slowly. "You have the power of making those around you happy."

"I am glad that you think this of me," she replied, simply. "I have never had much chance of helping people in my life. Every one has had somebody else. No one has seemed to want anything *I* could do."

"Well," he said, abruptly, "it may

perhaps be a pleasure to you to know that you have done me good, even in this short time. If you care to hear in what way, I will tell you before I leave Doondi."

"You are going to the northern station?"

"Yes. This morning Mr. Reay offered me a post there, and I accepted it gladly. I'm to have charge of one of the outside sheep-stations, at what seems to me a liberal salary. I believe there is a difficulty in getting a man for the place. It's about the last in the explored district, and the blacks are troublesome. I am very glad of the opening; and I shall be able in time I hope to take up a block of country, and when I have saved a little money to make a start for myself."

He spoke quietly and hopefully, with-

out any trace of bitterness. Isabel's thoughts reverted to his previous words.

"But," she said, timidly, "the Australian life is not a nightmare to all. They seem very cheerful and contented here—my uncle, for instance, who was a soldier like you, and enjoyed society and that sort of thing in England. And surely, many are fortunate ——"

"On the other hand, there are many failures. I accept your rebuke, Miss Gauntlett. It is my own fault that things have gone persistently wrong with me from my youth upward. I don't regret English society—and 'that sort of thing'; nor do I object to hard work. Under some circumstances one feels a savage pleasure in physical suffering."

"Oh!" said Isabel, shrinking again. "One must have been very unhappy for that."

"You can't imagine it! What English girl could, whose life has been a bed of rose-leaves? But it's true. I had a devil-may-care sort of sensation when I landed in Leichardt's Town, with a capital of fifty pounds and a land-order."

Isabel laughed sadly.

"I have been told that Mr. Reay had only the land-order."

"Of course I ought to have turned my pittance into a fortune," said Braddick.

"According to all colonial traditions I should have hit upon a rich claim or the site of a future township. But I did neither of these things. The money dribbled away. I found myself on the roads, 'humping my swag,' and breaking stones or splitting slabs for my grub."

"But your friends in England!" said Isabel. "They would have helped you."

"I had cut myself off from my friends,"

replied Braddick. "Oh, I wasn't to be pitied—I wanted to break away from old associations. It was then I determined to sink 'the gentleman,' and you can little imagine the wild sort of life I have been leading for the last six or seven years, now driving cattle—now on the diggings—now shepherding with a Chinaman, hobnobbing with a black trooper, or even with a bushranger. You see what promotion this start with Mr. Reay is to me. Fortune began to smile upon me the day I first saw you. At all events I have to thank you for the happiest day I have known for years. They are cantering on. Hadn't we better join them?"

In a few minutes the crossing was reached, and that strange night-ride was nearly at an end. The blacks' camp was

peaceful now; the fires burned low, and swarthy forms, wrapped in tattered blankets, lay round the embers. Again the riders halted in the river-bed. The moon shone down upon happy faces, and the poetry of the night set several hearts quivering with delicious agitation. All were sorry that the excursion was over, except indeed Ferguson, in his lonely misery; Sebastian, conscious of a trouble stirring his placid nature; and Mr. Gustavus devoured by bilious jealousy and suspicion. Gretta and Bertram Wyatt drew up at a little belt of scrub on the bank, and raised themselves in their stirrups to gather some clusters of the blossoms of a native shrub. A shower of sweetness rained upon them. They were bathed in perfume. As they rode on he said,

“England cannot give us anything better than this, Miss Reay. I shall remember this Christmas Eve as long as I live.”

No light, jesting reply rose to Gretta's lips. She could never answer him jestingly now. It occurred to her, at this moment, to wonder whether he had noticed how all her little mocking ways and frivolous talk failed her in his presence. She herself had never before recognised the fact so thoroughly. It frightened her. She knew that a great change had come to her during the past two weeks, but she did not yet understand its full meaning, and, with a thrill of mingled excitement and terror, shrank from the revelation. She felt no longer mistress of herself, and instinctively longed for a word or look which should

restore her sense of supremacy. She checked her horse.

“I want to speak to Mr. Ferguson,” she said, and waited till he had gained her side. Wyatt drew into the rear, but Gretta and James kept pace in silence. The same thought was in both their minds, but neither could give it expression. He in bitterness, and she in vague wonder and alarm, realised vividly how wide was the gulf which lay between this night and that other night, so short a time ago, when Gretta’s impulses had so nearly answered to his call. They were on the edge of the lagoon now, and the lights of the house shone on the hill above them. Mr. Reay, Mollie, and Clephane, in the veranda, sent down a welcoming *cooee*, and, in reply, one of the party began to sing the old, old

Christmas carol, in which all the voices
joined, near and distant, till it swelled
into a joyful pæan,

*“ God bless you, merry gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
Remember Christ our Saviour
Was born on Christmas Day.”*

CHAPTER X.

KING COMONGIN EXILED.

CHRISTMAS DAY this year fell upon a Sunday, which, at Doondi, was also mail-day.

At eleven o'clock all on the head station, family and guests, stockmen, fencers, Kanakas and half-a-dozen black-boys,—a few of the more respectably clad gins and stray lubras from the camp looking on from outside the courtyard—congregated in the broad, shady back veranda. It was a curious little assemblage, the two pretty girls in their bright-

coloured muslins and fluttering ribbons ; Hester, all in white, pale and dreamy ; matronly Mollie ; beaming Mrs. Blaize, in her best black silk and a white muslin Garibaldi ; the handsome Englishmen and stalwart bush youths ; and the heterogeneous company of "hands,"—the stockmen wearing moleskins which gave evidence of having been washed in the creek ; Maafu, the most civilized of Kanakas, in an ancient suit of Sib's, his tow-coloured hair well-greased, and a rose in his button-hole ; Combo, the delighted wearer of a dilapidated jockey-jacket, violet-silk and primrose sash—the Doondi colours ; and the other black boys in store trousers and blue shirts, with crimson handkerchiefs binding their waists and woolly heads, the bright colour contrasting with their ebony skins, bead-like eyes, and glistening teeth.

The black boys seated themselves on the edge of the veranda, with difficulty repressing their impish merriment; Maafu and his compatriots, grave and decorous, drew apart from the blacks, and produced their Church Services; the rest occupied chairs and benches; and Mr. Reay, standing before an extemporised lectern, read aloud the appropriate psalms and collects. They said a prayer; and afterwards, all standing up, and Gretta leading, sang:

"Come all ye faithful."

Then there was a general shaking of hands, a distribution of neat little packets, a great many "Merry Christmas's and Happy New Year's;" and the "Station Hands" went back to their huts to enjoy themselves.

Mrs. Blaize, however, who sought to redeem the errors of what she, good soul!

considered a frivolous life, and with a view to atonement for her husband's infidelity, detained the blacks; and, as was her wont on Sundays at Gundalunda, gave them instruction in the doctrines of Christianity. Jinks stood by, nodding approval, and every now and then, putting in a word of explanation, while Mrs. Blaize, her ringlets quivering, her face full of earnestness and solemnity, translated *Peep of Day* into a comical dialect suited to the aboriginal comprehension.

She was relating the history of the Fall, and describing the interview between Eve and Satan in the garden of Eden. A spry little nigger, Euroka by name, fresh from the Tieryboo tribe, listened in wonderment, evidently puzzled to adjust the tale to certain obvious facts of life which presented themselves to him on the Eura.

“Great spirit Yoolootanah say to Adam, ‘Baal you eat that fellow fruit. Suppose you eat him, corbon mine coola belonging to you.’ Then debbil debbil pialla Eve, ‘Budgery this fellow fruit—like it—like it—’” Mrs. Blaize paused, at a loss for an illustration that should commend itself to Euroka’s gastronomical experience, in which the conventional apple had no place.

“Like it bunya,” suggested Jinks.

“Yohi,” said Euroka, deeply interested.

“Debbil debbil climb along a tree,” continued Mrs. Blaize, exhibiting a picture which represented Eve draped in her hair, familiarly conversing with a boa-constrictor, the reptile entwining the stem of a palm from which a cluster of very large apples hung, in defiance of botanical laws.

“Baal that bunya,” cried Euroka, aggrieved. “What for snake?”

“You pidney,” explained Mrs. Blaize; “Debbil debbil been make him like it big fellow snake. Debbil debbil plenty pialla Eve ——”

“Baal, missus,” interrupted Euroka, derisively, his countenance expanding in a grin; “baal snake talkee talkee?”

Mrs. Blaize, a little non-plussed, referred to Genesis, and told how the great spirit Yoolootanah had informed Moses of the circumstance. But Euroka steadfastly refused to accept the statement which his own knowledge of natural history flatly contradicted, and, shaking his head gravely, declared,

“Mine think it, two fellow woolla. Two fellow tell a lie.”

The controversy grew warm. Jinks was properly orthodox in the matter of

into a glass which Stone filled from the water-cask.

“Merry Christmas, Stone.”

“Beg pardon, sir, no offence, sir, the same to you and your cattle. And I can tell you of a bullock that’s out of your mob, cap’en. I goes round the Gin Gin ridge, and I sees my noble Mr. Billy with the Tieryboo brand on the near shoulder, and I drives him close up to Gundalunda, and I says nothing at all, and just puts him inside the boundary fence.

“Any news, Stone?” asked Mr. Reay, leisurely cutting the string of the mail-bag.

“News! The colony is all agog. Gin Gin crossing is up, and so is the gully agin the boundary. An inch here makes a deal of difference there. The Ministry is out, and Catesby is forming another.”

“No!” ejaculated Mr. Reay, and Gretta whispered to Ferguson —

“He’ll be put in for Works, and I shall have a little of Leichardt’s Town gaiety this winter.”

“The new Governor has stepped into a constitutional crisis,” continued Stone. “He’s a peppery old chap, and has brought a lot of Chinese servants; there’s no missus, but there’s a young lady, and Lor, I never see’d her like except at Doondi.” Stone politely raised his hat to Gretta, and stared at Isabel. “I says to my old woman, there’s a beauty for you and no mistake. There’s been a reception, and the guns banging, and all the volunteers turned out, and a levée— Good-day to you, sir. Any message for Tieryboo, cap’en? I shall be there to-night.”

Mrs. Clephane delivered some instruc-

tions relating to domestic matters, while Mr. Reay turned over a couple of official-looking documents addressed to himself, and then sorted the contents of the mail-bag. There were a great many papers, some English magazines, which he tossed over to Hester, and a bundle of letters.

“Here’s a packet of Leichardt’s Town clavers for you, Gretta: and Miss Gauntlett, two, three, four English big’ uns.”

“There won’t be so many after a mail or two,” said Desmond in a melancholy tone. “Sure, and it’s thirty-two blood relations I’ve got over in the old counthry, and not a line from one of them, barring my mother.”

“That’s from the Meat Preserving place, Sib, I’d bet,” continued Mr. Reay; “I thought they’d be after a mob. Here, Durnford, two for you. This looks like a

lawyer's fist. Winch and Hellyar. Their office-mark isn't a nice sight for sore eyes—at least, I don't think so."

"I hope you haven't been getting into the clutches of the law, Mr. Durnford," said Gretta.

Durnford had taken the letter, and was opening it apparently with some anxiety. He uttered a faint ejaculation as he read, then laughed in a rather odd way to himself, and folded up the document, and transferred it to his pocket.

"No, Miss Reay," he said. "Poor men don't need lawyers, but Winch and Hellyar are a sort of standing address which I give, and I occasionally get a communication through them."

He moved away, and presently left the veranda and crossed over to his own quarters.

"Queer fish, Durnford," murmured

Clephane. "Let's hear the home news, Isabel," and the uncle and niece put their heads together over Lady Hetherington's epistle, which somehow smote Isabel with a chill: it was so stiff and unspon-taneous.

Meanwhile, Ryan had been watering his pack-horse, but now turned to remark,

"There's a bit of news you won't get in the mail, Mr. Reay. Captain Rainbow, as he calls himself, has stuck up a digger on the road to Moonbags, and taken his haul. The constables are after him, but they say he is in hiding at the head of the Eura up among the gorges, and they ain't likely to get at him there. You'll be having him bailing you up here, sir."

"No fear of that," returned Mr. Reay. "No such luck! I'd soon make short work of him. What is it, Braddick? You are not funking the bushrangers are you?"

Braddick had moved forward with an involuntary exclamation. He checked himself, and said quietly, "I happen to have seen Rainbow once, that's all. I was bushed one night, a few months ago, up in the Blue Mountain district, and came by accident upon his camp. I'll tell you about it another time."

"After we have read our letters," said Gretta. "I mustn't talk of eucalyptic cloisterdom again. This is quite romantic and Geoffrey Hamlynish. Perhaps he wears armour like Ned Kelly."

"That Kelly business was a mistake," jerked out Mr. Reay; "too much romance and sensationalism altogether! Every twopenny-halfpenny ruffian who takes to the bush apes Ned Kelly. I'd hang 'em all if I could. I'd stamp bushranging out of Australia. Girls, there's a letter from Catesby. I must start for Leichardt's

Town to-morrow. They've offered me 'Works'; and Dawkes is going to bring forward another Railway Bill."

Some jubilation followed. Mr. Reay was like a war-horse, which scented the battle from afar. But he eyed doubtfully another long blue envelope, and seemed in perturbation of spirit.

"The papers about Karslake's murder are in this," he said; "it's from Hill of the police. If Comongin is guilty they'll want me to give him up. I shall not do that, for he has been a faithful friend to me for many a year; but I must turn him off Doondi. Now I shall not open these papers till after the blacks have had their spree to-night, and then we must have our reckoning—Comongin and I."

Mr. Reay turned away, and went into his office, taking the papers with him.

“What is the story?” asked Bertram Wyatt, looking round.

“Why,” said Clephane, “I’ve long suspected that my father-in-law was harbouring a criminal, but he never would entertain the idea till, as I suppose is the case now, the truth forced itself upon him. I am only surprised that he does not immediately give Comongin up to the police. It would be quite in keeping with his character, wouldn’t it, Mollie? But I imagine that, with his stern sense of justice, he feels that there are some arguments on the black’s side. The story is this—Karslake was a government surveyor, employed in old days to mark out the boundary of the Eura. The blacks sneaked the camp, and murdered the whole party, except two men, who hid themselves, and after a bit managed to get down to Leichardt’s Town.

Some of the blacks were caught and punished ; but the ringleader, whom I imagine to have been Comongin, escaped."

"And Mr. Reay," inquired Wyatt, "how was he concerned in the affair?"

"Oh!" explained Clephane, "he took up land on the Eura a little while afterwards, picked up Comongin, a young native then, and his gin, who slept at the door of his hut, looked after him, and, for eight months, kept the blacks from spearing him and his cattle. That was before your father went to Victoria, wasn't it, Sib?"

Sib nodded.

"When he came back here ten years ago," continued Clephane, "Comongin, a veteran, promoted to royalty, turned up again, a most rare instance of loyalty among the blacks. Poor old Comongin!

He has kept many a spear from being hurled at the Doondi and Tieryboo cattle, and I am sorry the authorities have raked up the matter again. I have no doubt that things stand pretty equal, and that Karslake and his men had potted niggers in their time."

The little fête Gretta had planned took place on a flat not far from the stockyard and the lobster-holes. It had once been a sheep-station, and was covered with the short couchgrass, and upon it there stood a dilapidated building which had been used as a woolshed.

Hither, after dinner, the whole party betook themselves. All the blacks from the camp were assembled, Comongin at the head of his tribe, a conspicuous personage with his white hair, a red blanket

majestically draping his half-clad figure, and his brass plate reflecting the gleam of a huge bonfire they had kindled.

The woolshed was decorated with green boughs and creepers from the scrub. A trapeze had been erected, and two fencers in jerseys commenced proceedings by an acrobatic performance to an accompaniment of slow music from a concertina and a Jew's harp, played by a Doondi stockman and the celebrated Red Dick from Gundalunda. Bertram Wyatt sang a rollicking song, and Pat Desmond, with a good deal of buffoonery and a strong brogue recited a scene from *Handy Andy*.

The blacks, however, did not much relish this part of the programme; and now came the feature of the festivity—Gretta's surprise.

The shed was darkened and the natives

mustered round a long deal table, upon which stood two shallow earth-pans filled with raisins and brandy, Pat Desmond and Sib presiding at one end, Captain Clephane and Braddick at the other ; the ladies mounted on a sort of raised platform, which had been the shearing-floor, and which commanded a full view of all that was going on.

The blacks pressed round the table, twenty or thirty pairs of eyes peering eagerly into the dishes, while a confused jabber filled the room. Suddenly, the last light was extinguished, and a match put to the brandy. The blue and red flames leaped up, flickered, and blazed again, shedding Rembrantesque gleams and shadows. They played upon the slab walls, the dark rafters, the tattooed breasts of the savages, and the ebony faces, now alive with expectation and

now with alarm and awe, which changed presently to the most farcical amusement.

At first, a yell rang through the shed, then shrieks of "debbil! debbil!" and there was a pell-mell retreat on the part of the natives from the table. When, however, the white men were seen to dip their hands into the snapdragon, the savages rushed forward again; swarthy arms protruded, and shouts of laughter re-echoed, as black hands were withdrawn filled with plums and sheathed in fire.

They danced, they screamed, they rubbed their fingers on their bodies, and shook them wildly in the air, while flashes of blue flame flew hither and thither; then, cramming the plums into their mouths, again essayed the fiery ordeal.

By-and-bye salt was thrown into the

pans. The white men's faces assumed a deathly hue, and the illumination became ghastly and hellish. This was the culminating point. Black boys and gins clung frantically to each other, and retreated and advanced, yelling anew in mingled terror and delight. Now, the burning spirit was extinguished, and the lanterns relit.

As soon as the laughter had subsided the blacks made a circle round the bonfire on the flat. The gins, in the outer ring, clapped their hands and chanted monotonously to the music of tum-tums and rude wind instruments. The elder men beat their nulla-nullas and waved their spears; while Pompo and two or three companion braves—their upper clothing cast off, fantastic patterns painted in white and yellow upon their bare chests and backs—stepped into the

arena and executed a grotesque dance, in which, with a wild war-whoop, the advancing chorus joined at intervals.

It was the weirdest spectacle Isabel had ever beheld. The moonlight blended curiously with the glow of the burning logs, and the rhythmic movement of the half-naked forms, the swaying of barbaric weapons, the unearthly music, combined, perhaps, with the magnetic influence which Braddick's voice and presence exercised upon her, wrought upon her imagination, so that, for the moment, it was difficult to realise that she was not feeling and acting in a dream.

The corroboree was over all too soon, and the blacks dismissed to their camps, but, as they were turning away, after a general good-night had been said, Mr. Reay, who had been grave and silent during the evening, came out of the

woolshed and, in stern accents, called upon Comongin to remain. The old king lowered his spear and the nulla-nulla he was carrying on his shoulder, and stood forth, with the fire-light upon him, a squalid, tragi-comic, and yet not altogether unheroic, representative of aboriginal monarchy. The black's intuition is keen, and something in Mr. Reay's tone warned him that his hour was come.

"Comongin," said the squatter, "what for you tell me that baal you been mum-kull Karslake? That corbon long time; but baal mine forget. I believe you plenty woolla."

Then Mr. Reay proceeded to explain that the "Great White Mary along a big fellow water"—in other words, the Queen—had discovered, beyond doubt, that Comongin had been concerned in the murder of her brother Karslake, and had

sent her orders, through her servants the white chiefs in Leichardt's Town, requiring that he, Mr. Reay, should give up Comongin to be shot.

"Baal mine shoot you, Comongin," he continued, "because long time you budgery brother belonging to me, but suppose you nangry along a Doondi, big White Mary corbon coolla with me."

Then sentence was delivered. Comongin was deprived of the rights of brotherhood from henceforth. Never more should he set foot within the boundaries of Doondi, Tieryboo, or Gundalunda. Never more should he receive rations or tobacco at the hands of those present. Comongin was excommunicated, and bidden to "yan" for ever.

The old king uttered one long dismal howl, which was caught up by the tribe behind till the bush resounded with cries

of woe. Mrs. Blaize put in, a sobbing protest.

“Dear heart, Duncan, and is this what ye call peace and goodwill? Let him be —just for my sake! He’s a black, and I’m just soft about blacks. They’re an awful unregenerate set; but don’t I know what it is to be an unprofitable servant? Let him stop.”

“Judith, be silent; he must be sent away.”

“Then I’ll just go back to my own old man and try to convince him of the error of his own thoughts, and be you thankful, Isabel, that you’ve got nothing to do with men——though you will fast enough,” murmured Mrs. Blaize, in an aside; “they’re a stiff-necked, hard-hearted, contradictory lot.”

But, after the one outburst, Comongin met his fate like a discrowned king, with

a fortitude which was at once farcical and pathetic. He silenced his followers by a sharp injunction in their own yabber, and then approached Mr. Reay.

"Yohi," he said, holding his spear planted firmly before him. "Mine yan, Mine been mumkull Karslake What for?" he went on, raising his head, and gazing indignantly before him. "What for white man come and sit down close-up Eura, and mumkull poor fellow black? White man got plenty flour, plenty tschugar, plenty blanket, plenty chim-bacco. Black fellow want him flour, want him blanket. Baal white man give. White man marra gin belonging to black-fellow. Then black-fellow mumkull, and white man plenty coolla. What for? Baal black fellow pidney. Reay budgery you. Budgery you Gretta. Corbon mine

brother belonging to you. Plenty mine along a Doondi. Good-bye, Massa. Mine yan."

Without another word, Comongin folded his old red blanket about him, shouldered his spear, and departed. And Doondi saw his face no more.

CHAPTER XI.

A BUSH PICNIC.

A week was gone by. Mr. Reay had made his journey to Leichardt's Town, and returned—duly appointed Minister for Works—to superintend the last of the muster, and start the mob of cattle for the north, ere he settled himself in town for the business of the session.

It was the last day of the old year—the day fixed for Gretta's long-planned camping-out expedition.

The week had passed like a dream.

Love's spells work quickly in southern sunshine and silvery moonlight.

Gretta was possessed by a feverish unrest, a delicious trouble such as she had never known before, and which she alternately shrank from and revelled in. Ferguson's heart ached drearily, but he bore his pain like a man. Bertram Wyatt had yielded himself completely to the intoxication of the hour——moonlight rambles, nerve-thrillings when hands touched and voice vibrated, long looks, dreamy talks; and the flattering homage to manly vanity, paid in blushes and quickly-averted glances. These were sufficient to shut out visions of past or future.

Braddick, in his turn, was buoyantly unreasonably happy. He, too, had thrust responsibility from him, and lived in the present. He was natural, at his ease, and, under the influence of congenial society

and of a subtle sweet sympathy, had cast aside his former reserve and constraint. He talked freely to Isabel, imprudently perhaps, upon all subjects in which they had a common interest—music, art, Australian impressions, his European experiences, only pulling himself up when he found “Old Gold’s” jealous eyes fixed upon him with an expression which was full of meaning. In the day-time Mr. Gustavus had the field to himself, for Braddick was out on the run, or working at the head station, but in the evening he was forced to retire into the background, and it was then he sat apart and brooded on schemes of vengeance.

Isabel, meeting her fate in more tranquil fashion than Gretta, accepted the change that had come upon her without self-analysis, and no more coquetted with emotion than she would have coquetted

with a man whom she did not intend to marry. A woman may be slow in owning to herself that she loves and is beloved, but, by intuition, she is nevertheless dimly aware of the fact; and the consciousness which, as is the case in all loftier attachments, has crept at the first meeting into her heart, forces itself forward in its own time, and, to a noble woman, becomes a spiritual truth, a holy obligation, which it would be sacrilege and treason to resist.

And Hester and Durnford! Love was now their master. The brood of emotions born that day of avowal had grown with frightful rapidity into an imperious army, against which it were vain to struggle. Passion throbbed in them both with quicker pulse-beats, and caresses had become to them as stern a necessity of existence as food and drink.

Just at first, their intercourse had been placid and guarded, and had soothed rather than excited. They talked of their love, but as of something too sacred for expression in act. They called it friendship. They spoke of soul communion, and of the ideal wings upon which affection rises above the plane of materiality. And, as they grew eloquent, their fingers would creep together and their lips meet tremblingly. A world of innocent joy seemed opened to them by the kiss; and why turn away? Could that be wrong which was 'so beautiful? Could that be poisonous which was so sweet?

Sometimes they would start asunder overcome by vague terror; and brief periods of reaction would follow. Then, each alone—for it seemed a shame, an insult to the purity of their motives, so

to buckle and steel themselves against each other—each would silently resolve to abstain from draughts of the intoxicating nectar. There would be a tacit drawing apart, an avoidance of meetings in the lonely cave, nights of self-inflicted torture, mutual misconceptions, and at last the mingling of hearts once more.

The little procession was winding up the range. They had rounded Mount Comongin, and had left plains and timbered ridges far behind. Now they were in dense scrub where the bottle-trees rose weird and white, where the stately bunya-branches drooped, weighted with their heavy cones, and the quantongs shed their berries. Long withes sometimes coiled like snakes, hung from the upper boughs—dangerous traps for the unwary.

The girls' habits were torn by thorny undergrowth, nettles stung the horses' legs, and rotten timber crackled beneath their hoofs.

Two black boys pioneered. The rest followed in single file. Every now and then, there was a shout from Combo or his companion, "Look out, Gretta. Big fellow, 'guana!" or, "Plenty gammon White Mary! What for ride along a scrub, when corbon budgery road close up humpey?"

The tomahawks sounded cheerfully as the boys "blazed" a track for the return. It was a rough way, up stony ridges, down steep gullies, over break-neck rocks, and forward again—ever ascending.

Then a break in the scrub, and a precipitous rise, where they were obliged to dismount, and lead their horses. A rocky

knoll gained ; and now, a glorious view backward towards the ragged fringe of scrub, where red Moreton Bay pines and gaunt gums stood forth, hoary with moss, the untouched growth of years, and beyond, again, endless waves of forest and hill.

It was almost dusk when the highest point below Great Comongin was reached. This was a sort of excrescence of the mountain on its other side, and so invisible from Doondi. They stood upon a tiny plateau surrounded by grey volcanic-looking boulders, and the world lay below. The sun had set, but the glory of him lingered. A grim peak far to the west was outlined against the flaming track he had left. In the east, there stretched, barring the horizon, a jagged fantastic line of mountains—the Tieryboo

range—strange humps of rock, great precipices, irregular pyramids. These were faintly pink; and lo! ere many moments, they had become rose, deep crimson, dark and darker violet.

This spot had been chosen for the camping-place. The pack-horse was unladen, and the others hobbled and turned to grass. A small tent was pitched for the accommodation of the less robust ladies of the party. Gretta would have none. She must lie, she said, with her face to the sky, and her saddle for a pillow. The black boys were cutting grass and grass-tree tops, and strewing them upon the ground. The fire had been lighted, the saddle-bags unpacked, Mr. Clephane and Pat Desmond were boiling quart-pot tea. Some of the gentlemen prepared chops for broiling,

Mr. Reay spread out an array of pannikins, and Sib was cutting newly-peeled bark into plates and dishes.

Captain Clephane stood for a few moments rapt in contemplation of the landscape. He had a great deal to say about Australian scenery as compared with that of other countries.

"Magnificent!" he cried. "Talk of American mountains — they are too big — too overpowering. Here you have the effect within the limits of comprehension. There's a bit of colouring; and what a foreground! I wish I had brought my photographic apparatus."

This was the key-note to a discussion on photography, Mr. Gustavus Blaize remarking in his pedantic manner—

"It combines the advantages of pre-Raffaellism with a breadth, a scope, a greater accuracy — an absence of petty

detail." Whereupon the conversation turned abruptly upon the pre-Raffaelite school, and a picture painted some years back by one of its representatives was instanced. The painting had certain features, concerning which the two opinions differed. An argument arose, which only a person who had closely studied the work in question, and the method of the artist, could have settled. Braddick, leaning against a boulder close by, had been listening with interest to the colloquy. Suddenly he broke in; and, in reference to the mooted points, described the painting with such vividness and accuracy that Clephane uttered an ejaculation of surprise.

"I ought to know that picture," said Braddick, with an absent, half-melancholy laugh; "I've sat opposite it for long enough at a time. It used to be my refuge from the county bores at a ——"

He stopped short, and gave himself a little savage shake, and there passed over his face the reckless, self-indignant look, which a man may wear when he sees that he has committed a blunder. He met old Gustavus Blaize's eyes. They were fixed upon him, and alight with a gleam of flashing comprehension, blending with curiosity and triumph.

“At a dull dinner-party, perhaps,” put in Mr. Gustavus. “That picture was bought, some time after its first exhibition, by Colonel Westmoreland, of Glen Wold, and hangs in the dining-room at that place. Curious what a chain of associations may be lost for want of one small link. You have just supplied me with such a link, Mr. Braddick. I was staying in the neighbourhood of Glen Wold for a day or two, during my last visit to England, and my friends took

me over to see it. Colonel Westmoreland and his wife were abroad, but we were shown all over the house. There were some family portraits also. I now recall them distinctly. Strange . . . Strange!" and he chuckled maliciously.

Braddick looked him full in the face.

"You have a good memory, Mr. Blaize," he said, and turned away.

"Glen Wold," said Clephane, "that's in Devonshire. I remember meeting a Colonel Westmoreland woodcock-shooting with Hetherington—the only time I ever was at Heatherleigh. In those days nothing short of the best was good enough for me. Isabel, you are an authority. Where's Glen Wold? Have you ever been there?"

"No, Uncle Jack," returned Isabel. "It is more on the Dartmoor side. Louisa knew the Westmorelands very

well, and stayed there once or twice, but I never went with her. I think Mrs. Westmoreland is delicate, and that lately they have lived abroad a good deal.

Isabel had been watching Braddick. She saw how he had pulled himself together, noticed the expression of his face, and a quivering fear smote her. Dim thoughts began to shape themselves. More than once she had asked herself the questions, "Why is he here? Is it disgrace which has driven him from his home?" And then her heart had always proudly answered, "No; *he* can have done nothing which would dishonour him." So her heart replied now, but, underlying the assurance, there was a feeling of trouble, of vague doubt. Then, as she looked westerly towards the distant mountains, unheeding the chatter and buzz of preparation around her, she

thought of her dream in the railway carriage—of the eyes which had gazed so steadfastly into hers—of the words, “love is faith.”

An Alpine call echoed back from the rocky side of Comongin, which towered not far from the lesser mountain, the unwonted sound startling the rock-wallabies and caused the browsing horses to turn their heads and whinny in return. Clephane and Wyatt executed an effective jodelling chorus, and young Joe shouted, with unusual gallantry,

“Three cheers for the first girls that have got a-top of Little Comongin!”

“Come along with you,” said Mr. Reay; “the tea is infused, and I’d like fine to see those chops done. Keep your cheers till you have found the Myalls’ Waterhole.”

“That mysterious waterhole,” said

Gretta. "I've all sorts of uncanny fancies about it. Isn't it odd that no white man has come across it?"

"Very odd that Clephane hasn't done so in his many hunts after wild pigs and Tieryboo 'scrubbers,'" said Ferguson, with forced gaiety. The pigs and the "Tieryboo scrubbers" were rather a chaff in the district against Clephane.

"The blacks say debbil-debbil lives there, and that there's a cave near it full of dead men's bones," said Mollie.

"Sure, and it's the grub we'll tackle now," cried Desmond, lifting a fizzing chop; and the boys exclaimed,

"Here's a feast for the native dogs to-morrow! My word, just listen to them howling!"

Fitful bursts of dismal wailing proceeded from the scrub, but they were soon drowned by the clatter at the camp—tth

peals of merriment, and the flavour of gum-tree, which the bark-plates imparted to the mutton-chops. When the rough repast was over, some one proposed music.

It was night now, and the full moon, a fiery globe, rose slowly behind the distant peak. Of the kind, no more weird or picturesque scene could be imagined. The wild surroundings, grey boulders, forest, mountains, the utter loneliness and vastness of the bush, and the deep blue sky overhead, gemmed with brilliant constellations. In the foreground, the camp-fire, with its logs blazing up, and throwing broad flickering gleams athwart the rock-bound plateau, and upon the circle of picnickers. Combo and Billy stood in the rear, limbs and eyes dancing. The men lounged in easy attitudes; some smoking, some cutting tobacco, their saddles beside them. Isabel and Gretta

sat enthroned on a rug-covered log, their pretty figures showing to advantage in close-fitting habits, their heads bare. Mollie's fair plaits were touched with gold and her somewhat heavy features spiritualised by the half-lights; while Hester, almost entirely in shadow, her still pale face upturned, looked at that moment the incarnation of a poet's dream.

CHAPTER XII.

TAKEN ON TRUST.

MUSIC was proposed, and Clephane, who had a good baritone voice, led off with an Australian ballad. But the native dogs' howl swelled louder. It was the eeriest, most heart-breaking sound.

"Oh! this won't do," exclaimed Mr. Reay; "we shall none of us get any sleep to-night. Who is for a go at the dingoes?"

"Oh!" sighed Clephane, "the noise

is very horrible ; but it is so in harmony with the scene."

"Call that harmonious?" shrieked Joe, derisively; "here, you Combo, marra daloopil, and come along with me."

Clephane's sporting instinct conquered his sense of dramatic fitness. The party dispersed. Most of the men crept down with loaded guns towards the scrub; the others lingered with the ladies, who had moved away from the firelit circle and were exploring the plateau. There was much laughter over the tracing of a watercourse, with a view to the morning's ablutions. Gradually the sounds became more distant. Isabel had drawn into the rear, and now stood against a rock, with her head bent and her hands clasped before her. She was startled by Braddick's voice. She had observed that he joined the shooters.

"I have brought you this," he said, holding out a lace-like woollen wrap. "You don't take any care of yourself."

"Thank you," she threw it over her head, "I don't need to be taken care of now." She was touched by his thoughtfulness, and, as she looked up, he saw tenderness struggling in her eyes. "Why didn't you go with the others?" she asked.

"I don't care about shooting native dogs. I saw you here, and turned back. I wanted to be alone with you for a few minutes—in this place, where we shall probably never be together again. It is a queer wild spot, isn't it?"

"I like it," she answered, simply.

"So do I. Those stones look like the altars of a forgotten worship. We seem out of reach of every one—beyond the power of pitiless reality—in a world of

‘might have beens.’ I shall think of to-night and of you when I am far away in the Never Never country.”

“Is that where you are going?” she asked mechanically.

He laughed shortly.

“It sounds despairing doesn’t it? But in reality it’s quite a hopeful prospect for me. I may be able to take up good country, and sell it, and so get together a little capital. That’s much better than knocking about in the settled districts, and going from bad to worse.”

“Yes, much better,” she assented.

“I don’t want to buoy myself up with any hope of coming back to the Eura, or even of securing the appointment I told you of.”

“But that is settled?”

“Mr. Reay may change his mind and turn me adrift. It’s very likely. In that

case, the Never Never country will still be my destination. But there's no use in anticipating evil. If all goes well, and I start with the cattle, I might if I were getting on, be back in three years. Probably it would be much longer. At any rate, you would have gone away; and so to-night can never come over again."

There was a silence. She seemed to wish to break it, and a sound passed her lips, but no words came. It was he who spoke first.

"You would have gone away," he repeated, "and you wouldn't see the good you have aroused in me, and which I hope—no, which I feel certain—will live. But that wouldn't matter. It would be nothing to you." He paused and looked at her. Their eyes met in the moonlight, his questioning, hers answering; but not before the words had passed her lips in an

eager sort of gasp. "It would be—a great deal."

His voice deepened and faltered as he went on. "But even if you didn't know, or care, the good would still remain—and the memory of you."

"I should care," she said, very low. "You know that."

"Yes," he said, as if with an effort, "I think you would, little as I deserve it."

She did not speak.

"After all," he said, "it isn't wonderful that you should feel a sort of interest in me. I am an Australian experience to you; one which you wouldn't naturally have in England. There, when a man comes to grief, he drops away from the society of ladies."

"You came to grief!" she said, slowly.

"The fact is evident, I fancy. Whatever pains one may take, it is difficult to

quite obliterate the hall-mark of civilisation. That's a brand which under existing circumstances ought to have warned you that I wasn't fit company for you."

"Oh! don't speak like that," she exclaimed, pierced by the sadness of his tone.

"Do you remember the night we rode to the gorge?" he asked, "and my saying that you had done me good; and that before I left Doondi I would tell you in what way. Shall I tell you now?"

"Yes."

"You have given me back something which was very precious to me once, and which I thought I had entirely lost,"

"What is that?" she asked.

"My belief in women; my belief in goodness; my faith in God. You have given me back my ideal. Isn't that worth something?"

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“Oh!” she murmured, “it is worth all the world.”

“It’s worth all the world,” he repeated. “No one knows how blank life can be till he has tried living without it. Now you know what I have to be grateful to you for.”

Another pause. A volley of shot from the scrub. The dingoes were silent, but the curlews wailed now. Suddenly Isabel said,

“But you had them all the time—faith and trust and goodness. You only fancied that you had lost them.”

“No,” he answered; “they had gone, and they might never have come back again but for you. I shall like to think of you,” he went on softly, “up in the Never Never country when I am alone—in my hut or camping-out after the day’s rough work is done.”

"I had better tell you that your faith may, ere long, receive a shock. If I am not mistaken, Mr. Gustavus Blaize is aware of something in my past life, which he will probably repeat—to my discredit."

"But you—there is nothing?"

"Oh, yes!" he answered, sadly; "there is just everything—all that brought me out here and separated me from my own people. And I cannot tell you whether the story is true or false. If I am accused I cannot deny my guilt. That's the worst of it."

"Accused!" she cried, her face blanching. "Of what?"

"Don't ask me for the story—I couldn't tell it. If some one else does, you will hear and condemn me."

"I have said that I believed in you, Mr. Braddick—I didn't say that lightly."

He seemed to wince.

"Braddick is not my name," he said, slowly. "I took it—not because I *wanted* to hide my own.—I didn't care enough—but for the sake of other people who did care."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, a flash of brightness crossing her face. "I understand. It was all for the sake of others."

An involuntary movement brought her nearer to him, but he made no answering gesture. There was something like dread in his eyes, which were fastened on her.

"I am certain that it is so," she went on, her voice vibrating with an emotion of which in her earnestness she was unconscious. "No matter what any body tells me, I shall keep that belief; and you can't—you could not—take it away from me."

There was a questioning appeal in the

last words which thrilled him with anguish. It was a revelation of her feelings towards him, and it came upon him with a shock of terror and remorse. The sweet mystery which had surrounded their relations towards each other vanished in a second. He had sunned himself in the warmth of her sympathy, fearing no danger for her, and taking a reckless joy in his own risk. What did it matter for him? he thought. He loved her as he might worship a star. The bare suggestion that he could inspire her with any sentiment but gentle pity had seemed too fantastic, too improbable, for serious consideration. He had thrust it aside, with a jeer at his own vanity. Time was when women had been attracted by him—but now ——!

Yes! but now, as this young English girl, of his own caste, from his own

country, blushed and recoiled before the expression of his face—something stronger than tenderness betraying itself in her eyes and voice—and maidenly pride in her battling with true womanliness,—he realised in a passion of humility and of self-reproach into what strait he had blindly led her, and cursed himself for the sorrow he had brought upon her.

He turned away. A groan escaped him as he flung his arms across the boulder, and for an instant laid his head against them.

Presently he raised it. She had moved back, and was standing timid and down-cast, one little hand, dead-white in the moonlight, resting on the brown rock. He had a wild desire to cover it with his own, but restrained himself. On the opposite side of the plateau voices sounded.

The two parties were returning, and were cooeing to each other.

“I can’t let you think that I have been ill-used,” said Braddick, in shaken tones. “It wouldn’t be right—and—it wouldn’t be true. I have done a mean thing in laying myself out to get your sympathy. I had no right to ask you if you believed in me. You mustn’t. *You mustn’t*. For God’s sake don’t glorify me in your imagination. Don’t think of me as a sort of hero. It would be a disappointment to you to be undeceived; and whatever bad thing I might have done in my life, to give you pain would be a worse one.”

Isabel said nothing. The silence seemed long. She looked away from him, to the camp where figures were flitting to and fro. The strangeness of the scene impressed itself upon her consciousness

like a curious picture, while all the time she knew that he was gazing at her ; and, like a melancholy refrain, his words uttered previously repeated themselves in her mind, " To-night can never come over again." She moved a step or two forward.

"Gretta is at the camp," she said, quietly; "I had better go back."

They walked on without a word. Somebody called to them. It was Clephane, who with Sib was walking in advance of the party from the scrub.

"Isabel, I want to show you a dingo. He's a boomer. Wait here. Combo is dragging him up behind."

Isabel shrank.

"It's dead—oh, I don't want to see it."

Clephane laughed at her squeamishness. He and Braddick halted. Isabel stumbled over a loose stone and Sib put out his hand to help her.

The roughened fingers closed round hers. She had a grateful sense of brotherliness and protection.

"You are cold?" said Sib, looking at her with his patient dog-like eyes. "I don't think you are quite well. Are you?"

"Oh, I'm quite well, Mr. Sebastian."

Sib reddened.

"I wish you'd call me Sib. Everybody does. Sebastian is a mouthful of a name. They oughtn't to have given it to a boorish sort of chap like me."

"I don't think you are boorish, Sib. You are very kind."

"I want to be to you. Look here, Miss Gauntlett. I'll do anything for you. I'd ride overland to Torres' Straits if it would do you any good."

Isabel laughed sadly.

"I shouldn't ever want anything at Torres' Straits, Sib."

"But you may nearer home. And, if you do, promise me that you'll ask me."

"I promise, Sib," returned Isabel.

"You mean it?" he asked, eagerly.
"It's a promise. I'll remind you of it if I ever fancy the time has come."

CHAPTER XIII.

CAMPING OUT.

THE night passed like a disordered dream. No one slept much—except, perhaps, Joe, Mark, and the black boys, who had neither troubled hearts nor troubled digestions. The clanking of the horses' hobbles, the wild cries of night-birds, the strange shadows by which the vast circuit seemed peopled, the entire novelty of the situation, chased slumber from most eyes. Those who disdained shelter wrapped themselves in

their blankets—each making a pillow of his or her saddle—and lay in a circle round the dying fire. The moon shone during the early part of the night, and Gretta, quoting tales of moon-struck travellers, insisted upon wakefulness and conversation. Strange stories were told of bush ghosts, of phantom stockmen, and the haunters of lonely pools. Pat Desmond, in an awe-struck brogue, whispered legends of murdered diggers, and weird talk flowed till clouds drowned the moon and drowsy heads drooped, to be raised again at the groans of Mr. Gustavus Blaize, who had succumbed to the grasp of his enemy and demanded hot tea and brandy.

Within the tent Isabel, upon her couch of grass-tree tops, lay long sleepless, with a terrible sense of trouble and desolation at her heart. Towards morning she

dozed and dreamed, the pain ever present. When grey dawn crept up and the aromatic gums gave forth their scent and the air became alive with the shivering twitter of little birds, shouts of "A Happy New Year to you" rang among the rocks, and all were astir. They saw the sun rise and kiss the mountains, while every hill and crag blushed at his salutation. Then, after a hurried breakfast, the party mounted again. They followed downward a gorge where ferns grew rank, where crimson kennedia and hoyia tapestried the rocks, and the little pools were covered with iridescent film. Over a ridge, wattle-grown, golden feathers brushing them as they passed, and leaving fragrance with them; into the scrub again, with its majesty of hoary pines, its heavy earthy perfume, its wonders of berry and blossom, its gloom

of greenery. In the centre, as it seemed, of the wilderness progress was barred. A deep ravine divided the scrub, its sides too precipitous for foothold of horse. Here Nature's mightiest forces had been at work. The earth was scarred and lacerated, the ravine bed rifted and draggled, stones piled pell-mell, chasms yawning black and unfathomable. In one spot the watercourse widened into a lonely pool, begirt with dank arums and deadly-looking shrubs and creepers. The rocks were high, grim, and black. There was a boom of falling water, and an abrupt drop of some hundred feet and then a little passage, rock-bound, leading into mysterious depths of scrub. At this obstacle there was a halt. Combo shook his head, and, remarking, "Debbil-debbil sit down close up; mine nangry along a massa," refused to go further.

The horses were hobbled. Mr. Reay, declaring that his exploring days were over, elected to remain, boil the quart-pot tea, and arrange the mid-day camp. Mollie, the housewife, having in view the scanty store of preserves at Tieryboo, preferred the profitable occupation of gathering wild plums, which were plentiful here, to the fascination of the mysterious cave and waterhole.

“Sure, and it’s after scrub-turkeys that Joe and I’ll be looking,” cried Pat Desmond, shouldering his gun; and Braddick, waiting first to see whether Isabel meant to join Hester and adventurous Gretta in crossing the ravine, decided to accompany Pat.

He had avoided her all the morning, and, quiet and very silent, had ridden ahead with Sib and the boys. Isabel thus deserted fell a prey to Mr. Gustavus’s

amorous assiduities. Old Gold was in high spirits. The apparent coldness between Miss Gauntlett and Braddick augured well, he thought, for the success of his own suit, which he was determined to press at the first favourable occasion. The pedestrian expedition offered an opportunity ; and, though he hesitated for an instant before braving the perils of the precipice, love conquered cowardice, and he plunged boldly forward.

The three ladies shortened their habits with saddle-straps, and armed themselves with stout climbing-poles. Wyatt, strong, agile, and an Alpine mountaineer, offered Gretta his aid. Ferguson stood aloof, trimming his staff. She glanced timidly towards him, and then at Bertram, who interpreted her hesitation, and, manlike, felt the sting of rivalry. He fixed his eyes on Gretta, and said in a low tone,

"You needn't be afraid. I'm a better climber than you fancy. Come, give me your hand."

She surrendered it, and they took the lead; the others following by twos. Clinging to sapling-gums, and balancing themselves by their poles, they at last accomplished the descent.

Torn but triumphant they sent up shouts from the bed of the ravine, which were answered by *cooees* from above. They had come down slantwise, along a sort of gully bristling with tooth-like boulders, above and below which were beetling cliffs with ledges and crannies that afforded foothold only to yuros and rock wallabies.

The glen, which seemed gouged out of Mount Comongin's side, closed in here, pent by scrub-grown ranges. Broken and inaccessible precipices alternated with

patches of mallee and spinnifex, grim peaks towering above like the battlements of a Titanic citadel; while Comongin's summit showed through a rift at the upper end, and a small stream of water, having its rise in a mountain spring, flowed down the higher ravine and discharged itself over a wall of rock into the dark pool, beside which the little party stood.

"What do you say to it?" cried Clephane enthusiastically, waving his hand, and turning to Isabel.

"It's splendid, Uncle Jack."

*A wilderness of sweets for nature here
Wantoned as in her prime,"*

quoted Mr. Gustavus, a little breathlessly.

"Don't say, when you go back to England, that Australian scenery is all dead flat and gum-trees," continued Clephane.

"Why do you despise Australia?" asked Wyatt, following her.

"I don't despise it," she replied, with a little thrill in her voice. "It's very well in its way; but I want more."

They halted close to the waterfall. He leaned against the stump of a tree, in one of his easy picturesque attitudes, and taking off his felt hat twisted round it a withe of crimson kennedia, then put it on again.

"That's very becoming," said Gretta, with slight scorn.

He laughed.

"Shall I adorn yours?"

"No, thank you," she replied.

"I know what you want," he said, deliberately.

She looked at him but did not speak.

"It isn't a wider arena," he went on.

She shook her head.

"No," he said. "Insatiable desire for conquest is often the secret of discontent. But it isn't so with you. If that is what you care about, I should think your craving might be fully gratified even here."

"Doesn't it occur to you that wounded vanity may be at the bottom of it all?" said Gretta, with her light laugh. "Look at my faithless adorer"—with a motion of her head she indicated Mr. Gustavus Blaize, who a little way off was bending in a lover-like attitude over Miss Gauntlett. "He is proposing, or, if not, the crisis is imminent. I know all the symptoms."

Wyatt laughed in return. "No, no, vanity has nothing to do with it. The excitement of flirtation wouldn't satisfy you. You are thirsting for something much sweeter and more intoxicating."

"What is that?" she asked, quickly.

"Love," he answered, looking at her full. "That's the wine of life."

She did not return his gaze, and the laugh under which she tried to hide her embarrassment was a failure.

"It's a beverage that perhaps one is as well without," she replied, hardly. "Certainly it often leaves disagreeable effects."

"There are different kinds," he said. "Some are like bad champagne."

"At all events you speak from experience," returned Gretta with a touch of her old spirit. "And—and ——" she stopped with a little tremble of her lips, then the words burst forth as though involuntarily. "If I were a woman you *had* loved, and who loved you still, that speech would cure me of my folly."

Her dart seemed to sting him. He

shifted from his easy position and stood upright, disconcerted and very serious.

"I see what you think. You do me injustice. I am not quite a cad. To the women who were loyal to me I have been always loyal and true."

"True!" she repeated with sarcasm, which, alas, poor Gretta! she used as a weapon conscious all the time of its being an undignified one. "Can a person be true many times over?"

"There was never even one time," he exclaimed; "the woman I cared for jilted me. Do you think I wouldn't have waited faithfully for Hermione Baldock if she had been staunch?"

"Hermione!" said Gretta, lingering on the syllables with changed accents. "Is that her name?"

"Yes."

"She is beautiful?"

"Yes." He surveyed her as he spoke. "Not like you. I think that you are more beautiful, but one admires you and her, of course, from different points of view."

"How different?"

"She represents one type, you another. She belongs to the old world, you to the new."

"I understand. Miss Baldock represents civilization, I barbarism."

He made a gesture which indicated that the question did not admit of discussion.

"Miss Baldock has a great advantage over me," continued Gretta.

"I don't think so. You know it is said that one cannot serve God and Mammon. Excuse my blunt speaking. The comparison between you naturally suggests itself."

"I don't see why, naturally."

"Don't you? It seems to me that a man instinctively contrasts the woman he has loved with the woman he loves. There! It is out. My fate is in your hands. What will you say to me?"

Gretta uttered a strange little ejaculation, half sorrowful, half interrogative. Her face paled, and her eyes, dilating, gazed seriously into his. She seemed about to speak, then her lips drew tightly together again; she stood silent, with eyes averted.

"Well?" he asked. "You know that I love you."

Gretta turned towards him; but she looked past his face. It was evident that a conflict of feeling was going on within her. Unconsciously her nostrils quivered, and her little head reared itself in native pride. But the expression of

her eyes and lips was intensely pathetic. The fancy struck him that she resembled some beautiful savage creature in whom the instinct of freedom rebelled against her keeper's caresses, which were, nevertheless, sweet to her.

"I don't know," she said unwillingly, —and then with repressed vehemence—

"I'm not first with you. And I've always been first."

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "You are above such petty scruples. If you care for me, you'll put your hand honestly in mine, and we'll draw the curtain on the past."

He extended his arm, but she kept hers back.

"No!" she said with a touch of resentment; "Lightly won, lightly loved! Do you think I don't know that? You are quite mistaken about me. You look

upon me as an ignorant Australian girl—a sort of child of Nature.”

“Heaven forbid!” he interposed emphatically, “I don’t consider you in the least an unsophisticated person.”

Gretta laughed mirthlessly.

“At any rate, I ought to know something about the ways of men when they are in love, since there is hardly a marriageable one on the Eura, or the Doonbah, who hasn’t sworn that I am, or was, the sole object of his affections.”

“I can quite believe it,” returned Wyatt, grimly. “I hope that in other respects you won’t put me in the same category as your Australian admirers.”

“I have been given to understand that human nature doesn’t vary much with climate,” rejoined Gretta, in the mocking tone which concealed a more tragic meaning. “I think some of them did care

for me," she went on; "and I have observed that those who seemed most cut up took soonest to flirting with some one else. Ordinary men always do that. It's only one out of the common who can go on being fond of a girl and kind to her when she gives him nothing but pain."

"Such a man as James Ferguson, for instance," said Bertram, calmly.

"Yes," said Gretta, frankly. "I was thinking of him."

"I am sorry that I come so far below your standard," said Bertram, slowly and rather sadly; "but I don't think that you really mean all that you have said, or that you look upon me as so utterly weak and wanting in back-bone."

His accent touched Gretta to the quick.

"You are not weak. You are strong—horribly strong—but in a different way. It's your cold-bloodedness—I hate

it so—which gives you a sort of power. I don't want to yield to it. Now, do you understand?"

"Yes," he answered, "I think I do. I am quite contented to wait till you have made up your mind that I am thoroughly in earnest. You pay a poor compliment to yourself in imagining that I am not."

"It was only a year ago that you cared so much for Miss Baldock," said Gretta. "You will meet her in Leichardt's Town. Are you not afraid?"

"No."

"Then I am."

"Of what?" he asked.

"Of trusting you too much. I was watching your face the other day while you read the account of the Governor's reception."

"So I thought a minute ago, but it comes from the opposite side if I am not mistaken. By Jove! Suppose we have struck upon Captain Rainbow's retreat—and not a carbine amongst us!"

"Or anything to make us worth bailing up, except Miss Gauntlett's rings and Mr. Blaize's scarf-pin," said Wyatt, surveying the group as he poured some sherry into a pannikin. "I don't think we need be alarmed."

"That shot probably came from near the camp," put in Ferguson. "Sound travels quickly down these gorges."

Clephane consulted his watch. "We had better wire into the grub, and then set off. We have two good hours to play about in. Are you still hot on the water-hole, Gretta?"

Gretta protested that she would find it or die. They ate the sandwiches, and

wandered on down the ravine bed, discussing the plan of operations.

It was commonly reported that the scrub on the further side was full of mystery and wonders. Rumour told of a grove of oriental palms, of the waterhole with the inevitable Bunyip, of a cave filled with human bones, to say nothing of rare plants and *chucky-chuckies* and *geebongs* in abundance.

Each marvel had a special attraction for somebody. Hester wanted to see the palms and to find a rare fern which they had not in the rockery at Doondi.

Captain Clephane was all curiosity about the bones, and Sib expressed an invincible determination to discover the hiding-place of certain scrubbers which defied him when he was on horse-back. So when they reached a broken place in the precipice, and had successfully

clambered to the wooded country above, it was agreed that, with compasses, there could be no danger of being lost, and that each pair or party should explore according to discretion, provided always that proper precautions were taken in blazing a track, and that the trysting-place was gained within two hours.

They were all merry : and yet under the ripple of gaiety what a swell of passion was heaving !

Gretta seemed to have regained her lost vivacity and flung about jests and smart speeches. Isabel notwithstanding the aching at her heart was childishly exhilarated, her temperament susceptible to the influence of nature, acted upon by the novelty of the scene, the rich luxuriance of the vegetation, the moist, woody smell of the earth, and the brilliant hues and heavy odour of tropical flowers. Hester

waking up every now and then as from a dream, to join in with fitful speech or nervous laugh, was in reality only conscious of a heart-hunger which frightened her by its keenness. For four or five days she had seen but little of Durnford. The presence of guests at Doondi and the Christmas amusements had rendered dual solitude difficult. And then the very dread of espionage galled her pride and wounded her self-respect. To act a part before her sister and her father—to force her features into quietude to speak to Durnford of ordinary subjects, when her heart was beating almost to bursting with longing for some intimate assurance of his reverence and devotion,—was agony and degradation sometimes greater than she could bear. All his scorn of conventional forms, all his strength and tenderness, were needed to soften the smart of her

equivocal position. When these failed her she felt helpless and nerveless, while her imagination rioted in humiliating suggestions, and she convinced herself that she was a burden to him, and that he must despise her.

She fancied now that a change had come over him during the last day or two, not to be accounted for by the fits of reaction to which he was occasionally a prey. He was colder, more constrained, his manner was less watchful and tender. When he looked at her, he averted his eyes quickly; when he spoke to her it appeared that some painful consciousness checked his utterance. There had been no opportunity for explanation. Even during the ride to Little Comongin they had never been absolutely alone; and now when he took his place by her side, and they walked on in dreamy silence,

she felt dizzy from the tumult within her and the strain of concealing it.

The scrub was more open here than scrubs usually are. They kept together for a little way, wandering aimlessly through a labyrinth of ghostly white bottle trees, over moss-grown stones and fallen logs, till, as they penetrated further, the foliage interlaced more closely overhead, and the gloom intensified, the silence and solitude becoming more oppressive, so that it seemed impossible that foot of man could ever before have trodden in this primæval forest.

Gradually now they divided. The laughter became more subdued, the voices widened apart, and, at last, were only echoes, these too ceasing. Some eager ones pressed forward, others idly lingered, attracted this way and that by a rare creeper, a cluster of luscious berries, a

mighty staghorn - fern that must be chopped down and in some fashion conveyed to Doondi, or a grassy vista stretching along like a vast cathedral aisle where strange shadows seemed to beckon till all had vanished. At last, Hester and Durnford found themselves alone.

Unawares, they had entered a little dell surrounded by precipitous rocks, and strewn with lichen-covered stones. It was not more than a few yards across, and had evidently once been used as a camping-ground by the blacks, for the granite wall was black with smoke, and here and there might be seen half calcined bones of different animals. A huge Moreton Bay fig-tree flourished in the richer soil accumulated by the washing down of débris and decaying vegetation from the higher ground, which appeared inaccessible save by a breakneck climb

up the face of the precipice. On the slope above, the undergrowth was rank, save where the bare rock lay exposed, showing fissures and gloomy recesses which might have served as lairs to many a wild beast, were there such in Australia.

Loneliness more intense could not be imagined. Hester raised her voice in a feeble *cooe*, but only its echo came back to her. A curious tremor seized her, and she felt almost afraid as she looked round the forbidding refuge and up at the wilderness which closed them in. No sound was to be heard except the distant roar of the cataract. The atmosphere was close and still. Even the leaves made no murmur, for not a breath of breeze reached them here.

“What a strange place!” she said, trying to speak naturally. “Where are we?”

“Don’t you hear the waterfall? The ravine lies down to our right; and over there is Comongin. The world is outside of us. We can get no further.”

“Let us stay here for a little while,” she said; “I am tired.”

He took her hand in his, and, holding her a short distance from him, looked at her earnestly.

“What is it?” she said. “I have not vexed you, have I?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“I don’t know. We have been so little together lately, and the last time we met you were cold and reserved.”

“I must be reserved. If I gave myself rein you would shrink from me. Come, we will sit here and rest.”

He drew her to a ledge of rock abutting from the precipice, and, when she was

seated, placed himself on the ground at her feet.

"We can get no further," he added, again. "We have been going blindly on, without steering our course, and now we have come to a dead blank wall."

She bent towards him with a questioning ejaculation, for his tone seemed to indicate a deeper meaning than his words conveyed. But his eyes were turned from her. She sighed, but said nothing. He threw himself back.

"As I lie here," he said, presently, "I look straight up to the sky. There is nothing between us and the beautiful endless blue. No prying eyes, no hollow shams, no veils nor pretences. We dare not let the world see our hearts, but we dare show them to God."

"Is that true?" she cried. "I try to feel so, but I cannot. When I am with

you our love seems beautiful and natural ; but when we are apart I know that it is wicked, and that it would have been better if we had never met." He raised himself on his arm, and looked up at her.

"Will you take off your hat?" he said. "I like to see your face."

She obeyed.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "You look ill ; you look sad ; you look unsatisfied."

"I am not ill," she answered, "but I am sad and unsatisfied."

He gave a groan.

"It has all been a mistake then?"

"I thought it would be different," she said, dreamily. "I thought that to know you loved me, to have your sympathy and companionship, would be all that I should need."

"Is it not enough?" he asked, with

feverish eagerness which seemed to beg for a negative.

"It ought to be enough," she exclaimed. "What should I want more? But why this doubt and unrest? Why should I torment myself with the fancy that my happiness cannot last—that you will weary of me—and that I must snatch at whatever joys the hour gives me? This is not the perfect peace I dreamed of at first."

"There can be no true peace, no true joy for us, till the conditions of our life are altered," he answered, with forced calmness—"till we belong wholly to each other."

She was silent for several moments, he watching her face closely. Then—

"That can never be," she said, very low.

He started to a sitting posture.

"You say that it can never be. Why? Because you are married. Well, your husband is free to claim you. If he were to do so to-morrow would you go back to him?"

She shuddered.

"No."

"Yet you hold yourself bound," he went on, pitilessly. "What binds you?"

"God's law," she said, falteringly.

"I deny that. The law is of man's making, not God's. God made love; man made marriage."

He waited for a minute, she did not speak.

"Hester," he said, more gently, "have you missed me the last few days?"

"Oh!" she cried, "I have longed for you."

He took her hand and softly kissed it.

"I knew it. Every night—all night I

have thought of you. You don't know——It is so ghastly," he cried, "to wake up and to *feel* that you love me; and to *know*, with a poet's passionate instinct, that you belong to me, and yet not be able to stir hand or foot to make you my own."

"It was not like this at first," she said, pitifully; "you did not want me so much then."

"I've always wanted you," he exclaimed. "Even before we had met my heart hungered for you as the soul yearns to its mate. . . . But at first it was all strange to you. You were afraid. You didn't like me to talk to you of love. You wanted to call it friendship."

"It is friendship," she said.

"And more—a thousand—a million times more. What is the secret of your unrest? Isn't it that something within

you is perpetually struggling to free itself that it may fly to me?" He rose and walked agitatedly up and down the glen. She sat silent and despairingly calm. When he returned to her he too was calm, but very pale. "Hester," he said quietly, "I have got something to read to you. Will you listen?"

She welcomed his changed manner.

"Oh, gladly. It's something beautiful that you have written?"

"I don't know whether it's beautiful or not. It came from my soul; and if intensity of feeling means truth it's true."

Hester leaned back with drooped eyelids and waited. The poet's melodious tones thrilled as he read.

*"O love of loves, this once if never more
Let the strong fiery soul within me speak,
Maddened by that strange sweet curve of thy cheek,
Wild with old dreams that haunted us of yore*

*Where murmuring ripples kiss the fern-fringed shore
And pulse along the mountain-shadowed creek.
Here Nature's giant soul condemns the weak
And seems itself to exult in passion's war.*

*I love thee, love thee, love thee past recall.
And hath not love like mine the right to break
The whole world's laws in sunder for thy sake?
The right to claim thee, own thee before all?
There is no truth in Heaven, no truth in song,
No truth in God, if this sweet thing be wrong."*

*" Because I love thee so, I stand alone
Before thee; and in Love's high name I say
That love like ours creates from day to day,
As God creates, the laws its heart doth own.
All deeds are crimes save one deed, to dethrone
The craven doubt that turns love's gold hair grey,
And palsies passion with infirm delay,
And changes music's soul into a moan.*

*Am I not strong for thee? As strong as God:
Yea, stronger for the moment, in that He
Just for one hour gives up his might to me,
And as with lightning-finger points our road.
If I am strength eternal and divine
Be thou God's sweetness, when thy lips touch mine." **

As she listened to the passionate words
it seemed to Hester that something fiery

* The author is indebted for these sonnets to Mr. George Barlow.

and strange came close to her and wrapped her round, drawing her very life so that she could not breathe nor stir. She became cold, and the blood forsook her limbs, and, in the silence that followed, she could hear her heart throbbing. Presently she knew that he had come nearer to her and was at her feet. She flung her hands over her face and bowed herself forward. She was sobbing. He seated himself on the rock by her side, and, drawing down her hands, soothed her gently and tenderly as though she had been a child.

END OF VOL. II.

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